

LOG HORIZON

7 供 賛 〈くにえ〉の 黄金

橙乃ままれ 著 ハラカズヒロ 画



供 賛 〈くにえ〉の 黄金

ログ・ホライズン 7

橙乃ままれ

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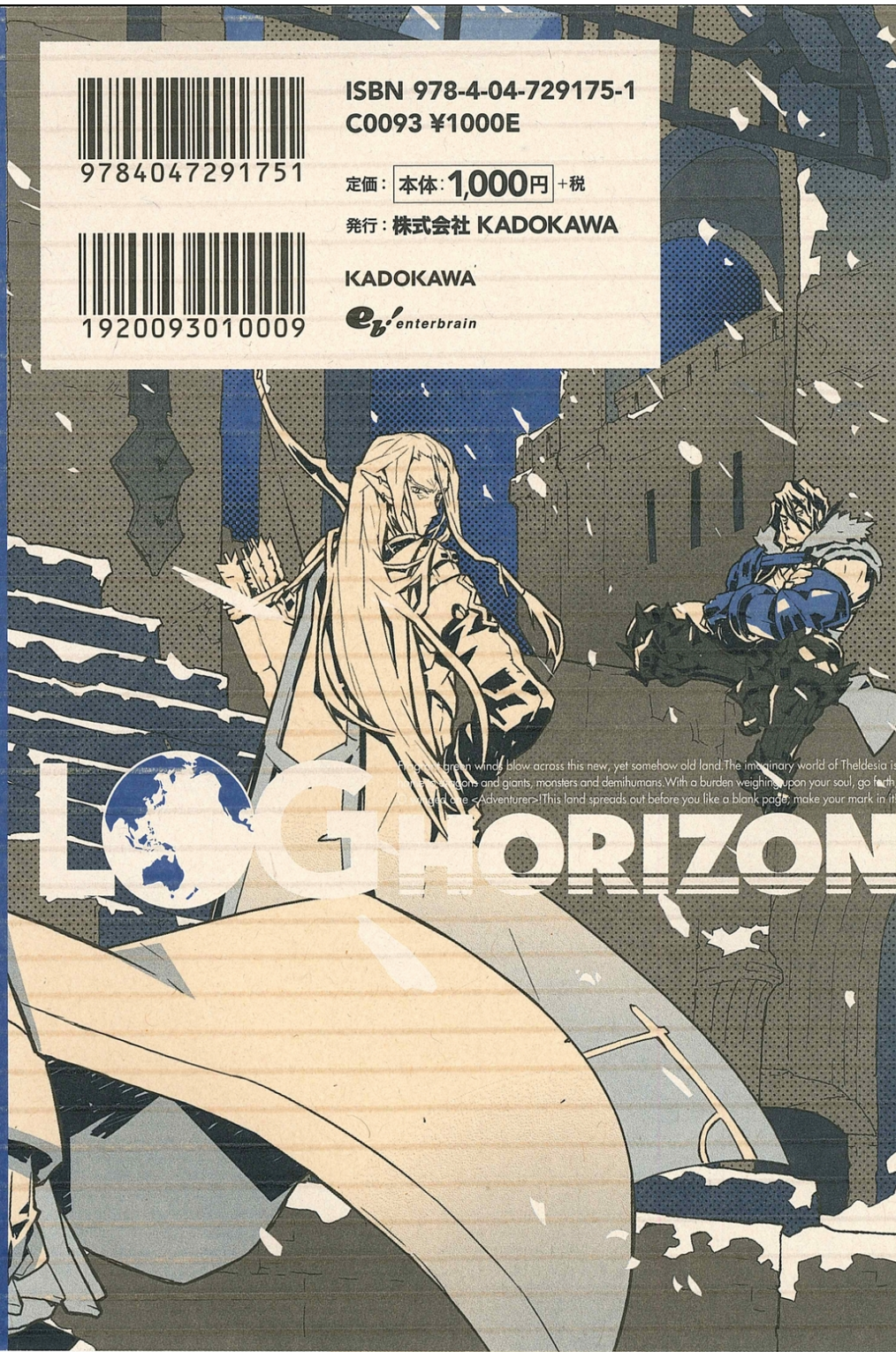
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LOG HORIZON

As the green winds blow across this new, yet somehow old land, the imaginary world of Theldestia is revealed. In this world, there are dragons and giants, monsters and demihumans. With a burden weighing upon your soul, go forth and explore this vast land. -Adventurer- This land spreads out before you like a blank page, make your mark in it!

ログ・ホライズン



LOG HORIZON

ロ グ ・ ホ ラ イ ズ ン

Fragment your world. Ideas across the seas, yet somehow still local. The imaginary world of *Horizon* is
 home to dragons and gods, monsters and demigods. With a horizon stretching upon your soul, go forth,
 O winged one, and conquer. This local spreads but takes you like a blank page. Make your mark in it.

7 供 賛 (くにえ) の 黄 金

橙乃ままれ

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おぼんつ戦士

直継

シロエの親友で、戦術家。〈守護騎士〉。〈放浪者の茶会〉出身の陽気な青年。一時〈エルダー・テイル〉から離れており、復帰後はゲーム世界に閉じ込められた。



ラタク気質の大地人魔法学者

リガン

ゲームとしての〈エルダー・テイル〉公式設定にも登場する〈ミラル・レイクの賢者〉を世襲している。〈大地人〉の中でもかなり高い教養と知識を持ち、各種事情にも明るい。



老練な若頭

董星

銀行など、〈冒険者〉に欠かせない各種サービスを管理、提供する〈供養一族〉の若き頭領。交渉事においてはシロエも舌を巻くボーカリエイスの難物。



ミスリルアイズ

ウィリアム＝マサチューセッツ

戦術系精鋭ギルド〈シルバード〉の野戦指揮官。〈田舎会議〉設立の会議に招かれるも、アキバの自治に興味を示さず、会議の途中で離脱した。



暴力自慢のチンピラ

デミクアス

ススキノの街を恐怖で支配しかけていたギルド〈ブリガンティア〉の統率者にして〈武闘家〉。シロエに完膚なきまでに叩きのめされて以来、シロエに恨みを抱いている。



自称「銀河系」アイドル

てんぷら

宇宙で一番可愛いを自負する〈旅団長〉。細い身体に愛と勇気と希望と良い気とイタズラ心とドヤ顔と詰め込んで、布教活動に余念がない銀河系アイドル（広域指定演説人）である。



あらすじ▼

アキバのお祭（天神祭）以来、アカツキは悩み続けていた。自分が腕の立つ〈暗殺者〉であるという自信はあるものの、人間関係を敬遠し大規模戦闘の経験がないせいで、「超一流」とは言えなかったからだ。ゆえに「口伝」という新たな特技を得ようと、その方法を必死に探っていた。

その頃、アキバの街中で起こるはずのない殺人事件が発生。

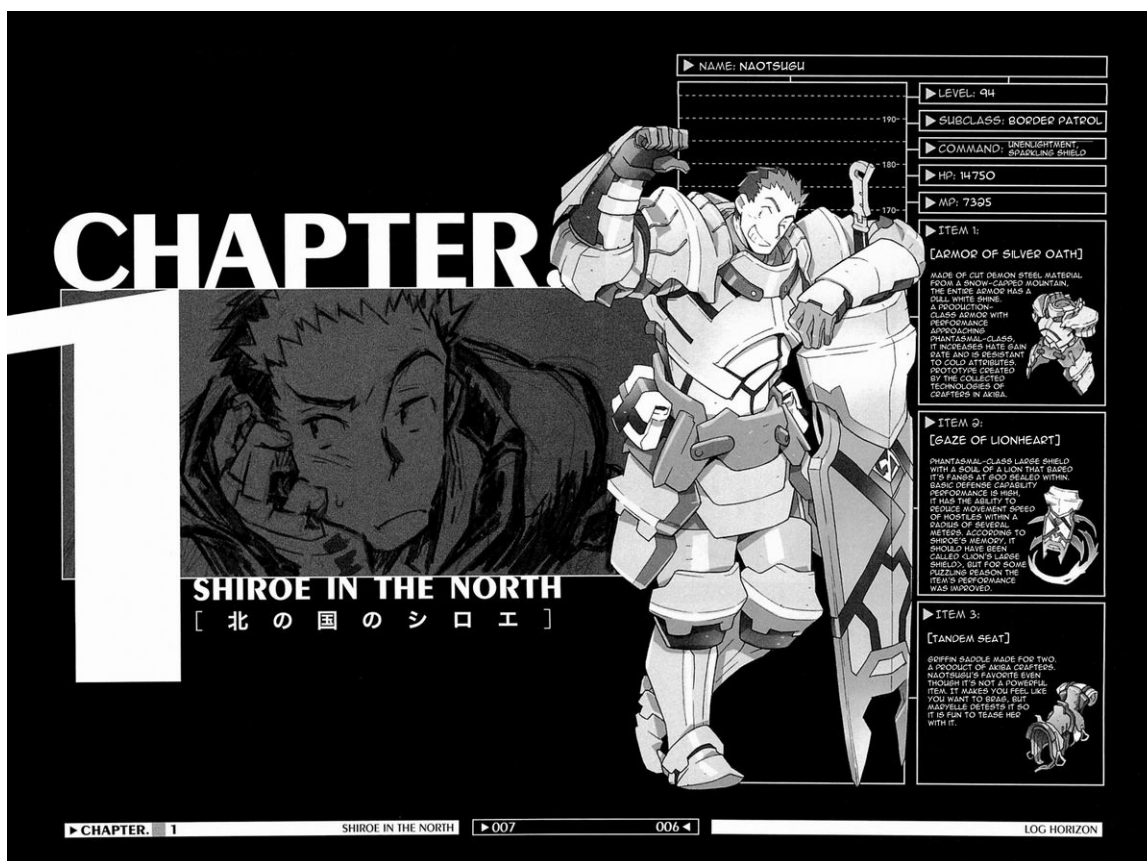
シロエ不在の状況下のため、必死に事件解明を急いだアカツキは、殺人鬼との戦闘ではじめて「死」を経験する。その生と死のはざまの海でアカツキはシロエと再会、それが迷いを断ち切るきっかけとなった。

大神殿でアカツキが復活したとき、目の前には彼女を心配するたくさんさんのアキバの面々がいた。アカツキはニガテだった人との関わりから逃げず、はじめて「力」を貸してほしい」と真摯に頼み込んだ。

結果、アカツキだけの口伝である〈影遁〉を会得し、多くの仲間と力を合わせることで殺人鬼を倒すことに成功。

そのとき、彼女は「口伝」とともにはじめての「友だち」も得たのだった。





Chapter 1: Shiroe in the North

Part 1

The dim red Fox Light illuminated the luxurious room.

Unlike the Bug Light common in Akiba, it was a weak flame. It could not light up such a spacious room. The flickering fire shone in the room unevenly, casting shadows everywhere.

The room which seemed to be empty had an occupant.

A woman with black hair curled up in the dark with a shawl wrapped around her.

But the room didn't look desolate.

This was a room outfitted with extravagant furniture. A beautiful cotton couch, walls adorned with damask, a bed with a canopy and a table made from marble. But you couldn't feel the tender usage of the owner in these items. They were simply commanded to be displayed there, giving off a mechanical atmosphere akin to strangers.

Nureha who appeared to be hiding amongst the shadows of the furniture was mulling away a sleepless night as usual.

She could see papers pouring down like a waterfall from a small round table in her field of vision. A document which seemed to be filled with some words was stained with a red mark like a flower. On closer inspection, it appeared to be red wine.

Nureha focused on the scenery in this dim room.

It was impossible to read the small words written with dedication on the papers in such a dark room. Nureha was just using her eyes to oppose these documents as well as the illusions that were rising from the darkness.

All sorts of things emerged from the darkness, most of them being blurry white humanoid figures.

The figures with hazy outlines were conversing in tiny voices beyond the range of Nureha's hearing, stealing glances at Nureha. The smoke-like shadows with hazy faces seemed to be judging her as they looked at her tauntingly.

Nureha clenched her fist as she glared at them.

Sometimes the illusions could solidify, Nureha had seen such a frighteningly big arm materialized before. If the hand grabbed Nureha's hair, it would drag her towards the white figures.

Nureha let out a feral growl, she learned that the shadows would dissipate if she did that.

She covered her ears to block out the curse like sounds, mulling away the night.

This guild house with 16 luxurious rooms was for Nureha's personal use. Aside from Nureha, there were less than 10 people with the right to access the guild building. At this late hour, only the People of the Land maid on duty might visit.

Nureha spent the seemingly endless night alone in the shadows.

She didn't have the memory of what she had done to deserve this. A deep fatigue encompassed her. Her blood that had turned cold circulated around her limbs as heavy as sandbags, the world was as depressing as a city sunk underwater.

This was normal. She had always felt this way.

The nights were lonely even with this Adventurer body.

She lifted her slender hand before her eyes.

Thin, white and tender, fingers that were like a delicate piece of art.

Like a bewitching sculpture, her nails glittered with a pink glow.

Her flawless skin extended down from her fingertips. Her arm seemed to lack warmth, but was soft to the touch.

Joyous feelings she could not suppress were mixed together with the disgusting darkness.

Even though Nureha did not acknowledge the high value of her body, she understood why others fell heads over heels for her. It was a rotten happiness. Enchanting fingers which were much more alluring than her real life self seemed to be caressing the darkness as they moved.

With a sweet husky voice, fragrance of flowers and clothes that fit snugly over the curves of her body, these were things others craved for. If she thought of it this way, an impure sense of joy welled up.

The white figures that claimed the area around the fallen documents let out a short burst of laughter of contempt. The white figures seemed to be accusing her with groans, but the winds had turned. Nureha was not enduring the pain like before.

Nureha wore her blanket like a mantle as she cawed like a bird.

She thought this was a sound that boded misfortune.

She couldn't let out such a loud and irritating voice in front of anyone, be it the young head of the ruling clan, the chief Sentinal Roreiru, Zerudeyusu or Nakarunado. Tempting others with her alluring honeyed voice was the norm for Nureha. It had always been like this before, and would continue to be in the future.

She thought she was boring.

She thought she was silly.

Even though she thought this way, the crowd craved after the boring and silly Nureha and continued to fight, sigh and belittle others in order to show their own superiority.

Those who looked down on Nureha and accused her of endangering the world were now willing to give their whole fortune and even lives for Nureha's sweet husky voice. This was the weapon and armor Nureha used to mill away the endless night. It allowed Nureha to forget the pain momentarily as the screams of all those fighting over her drowned out the sorrow.

The people who worshiped the worthless Nureha like treasure seemed so silly. The silliness granted Nureha warmth and a numbing sense of healing and sweetness.

Just looking at them gave Nureha so much joy. On top of that, just by observing the bickering of the dull people around Nureha, she confirmed once again that the world was worthless just like she was.

She couldn't help but smile when she remembered the warning given by an Adventurer with a pallid face

'-- This world is not a game. We have to struggle for our survival.'

Nureha was aware of the sinister smile she was showing.

What a foolish thing to say. Meaningless. What's the use of saying this now. Nureha thought they were still half asleep. The young Adventurer who said this was now a member of Plant hwyaden, working and dedicating his life for the guild. Was joining a guild and becoming a worker ant the struggle he was talking about?

Foolish.

Just hours after the Catastrophe, Nureha swindled all the money, food, weapons and armor of the Adventurers around her. It was too easy. They believed all the ridiculous lies she told them after falling into a panic.

A couple of days later, Nureha obtained information of this new world through the dedication of her devotees. After giving up on thinking because of the shock of the Catastrophe, they followed Nureha without question. With her gentle words soothing them, distracting them from their worries, Nureha was able to organize them, and became the richest Adventurer in Minami.

One month after the Catastrophe, she was able to gain control of the Guards in the south after mastering her 'Over level' skill.

The coup was over without anyone knowing it. With her overwhelming military force, Nureha negotiated with the aristocrats and rulers of the People of the Land, amassing even more wealth. With this, buying the cathedral was a piece of cake.

That's right, it was that simple.

This was the struggle for survival the young Adventurer warned her about as if it were some guarded secret.

This was beyond the realms of silliness.

She even hated the young man for being so naive.

This world was not a game. Nureha laughed from the bottom of her heart when she heard this. Nureha was thankful for his naive words. People became trusting when faced with disasters they had never seen before and then turned into cattle ready for slaughter.

Looking at the serious and desperate face of the youth, she was tempted to vent her dark emotions, but she maintained her attitude of a loving big sister. She was aware that this was the mask he wanted the most.

But the impulse to laugh continued to fill Nureha's heart.

She knew. She had always known.

Nureha had never played around.

She only treated Elder Tales as a game or entertainment in the very beginning.

For most players, Elder Tales was just a MMO computer game, but it was a battlefield without mercy for Nureha.

If she stopped shedding blood and tears, she would be forgotten.

If she were forgotten, she would disappear from this world.

If a person were not sought after or cherished by someone else, it would be the same as being dead. No, it would be worse than death.

Being dead might just be a vast emptiness, but to live life without any meaning, without anyone caring about you, just treating you like dirt was unlike a peaceful death. Being an unimportant flawed presence your whole life, that was an unending hell.

In order to gain the goodwill of others, in order to make others love her, in order to make them fight for her, Nureha dedicated herself to research with abandon.

Nureha knew about hell, she knew the burning sensation of solitude.

No matter the hardship, it was a hundred times better than being ignored by others. The fruits of her research allowed her every gesture and word to garner the favor of others, who Nureha discarded like trash onto the floor, and then she repeated the process with new victims.

Nureha thought that they deserved it. It was a ritual to prove 'your feelings for me are worthless'. Only players whose eyes had been muddled by selfish wants would present their goodwill to the twisted Nureha.

'-- We have to struggle for our survival.'

A comedic line.

It seemed to suggest that there was no need to fight for survival in their old world.

Maybe that was true. Maybe that was the case for that youth. Maybe he was pampered in his life, or maybe there was something wrong with his head. When she thought of this, she felt the impulse to laugh out loud, as the darkness and hatred inside her swelled.

From what Nureha knew, every moment was a battle for survival. Be it the old world or this one, that didn't change.

Analyze the system, find the weakness, make them careless, manipulate them, earn their trust, betray them, take everything from them. These were the basic rules of the world. To say it out loud to show your determination was beyond stupid.

She was aware of the reason she gained control of Minami so easily.

Nureha planned this from the very beginning. Of the tens of thousands of Adventurers wandering this world, Nureha was the only one to see this as reality and not just a game from the very beginning. This was the norm for Nureha after all.

Nureha garnered the goodwill of others just like when Elder Tales was just a game, while walking the thin line of sowing discord and gaining the favor of others. She had always been chasing after the advantage for herself. That was why she was beloved by the people and became the center of Plant hwyaden. The world chose Nureha and she obtained happiness. She obtained everything!

She listened to the sound of her own breathing while glaring at the shadows.

Why was she, the chosen one, in such a pitiful state? Nureha shivered as she hugged her tail like a pillow.

Why was she cowering like a wounded beast, struggling to mill the night away with bated breath?

Nureha ground her teeth and her fox ears fidgeted.

She lifted her head and looked up, the door which shaped the light into a rectangle opened, with the figure of the maid in the middle.

"Lady Nureha."

"..."

Nureha averted her eyes, blatantly ignoring her words. The maid who oversaw the actual operations, Indicus. Although she was Nureha's key advisor, Nureha was totally not interested in her. On further thought, she might be a woman who was haunting Nureha like some sort of curse.

"You are not sleeping on the bed again."

"..."

Nureha looked at the silhouette of Indicus standing against the light at the door.

In place of her usual emotionless mask, Indicus was smiling. Although she only showed this smile to Nureha, Nureha felt her stomach cramping every time she saw it. No matter how she tried to cleanse herself, no matter how

she attempted to mask it, Nureha still felt the pungent smell similar to the arm reaching out for her from the darkness.

"Are you thinking about Shiroe?"

"..."

Nureha kept on staring.

But Indicus wouldn't back off or disappear from intimidation like the white figures.

Indicus continued to wear her smile like a sticker on her face, glided in and bent down to look at Nureha.

Nureha bit her lips when she smelled cold steel as Indicus came near her. It was the taste of clean blades that didn't match well with women.

"Is that it?"

"Don't talk about him."

Her furious words seemed to fall on deaf ears.

It had always been this way. Of all the demands Nureha made, Indicus refused to oblige on this one thing. Indicus was willing to give up everything for this one.

"I told you so didn't I? Of course I did. That man won't do. It didn't work despite all your efforts. That man has no worries to hold him back. He has always been like this. He is not a normal player, just background noise who has some minor accomplishments... Hey, Nureha?"

Pain and horror seeped into Nureha's view.

"That man is beyond your grasp. He is just a traitor with a little street smarts. Or rather, he has an obsession with cleanliness. And you stink like the sewers."

She knew it was coming and had braced herself, but Indicus' remark still stung like salt on a wound. The countless memories she had suppressed in the darkness squirmed in Nureha's chest like restless spirits.

That was what the white figures had been whispering about.

It was the past Nureha had already left behind in the old world.

"Who do you expect to approach and caress you? A filthy, broken hobo like you? Aren't you nothing but a stowaway on a train? Even the specks of dust on you are lies. The truth is that your past smells more pungent than an open sewage cover. Wearing your disgusting smile, with no control over your desires as you gaze longingly over to our side, a lowlife like you?"

The intense terror that held a stranglehold over Nureha awoke.

The plastic plates. Soup with pieces of trash mixed in. Hiding in the narrow storage compartment, hoping to evade detection. Her belongings was hidden from her, having to walk barefooted on the road. Memories of hiding in the bushes, not wanting her family to find her. The memories of all her failures.

"Please face the truth. Don't ever hope that someone like you can connect socially with anyone. That's right, a dirty woman like you will only be able to make a contract with someone like me."

She grit her teeth to hold back the feeling of nausea.

It worked this time.

Lucky.



To hide her weakness, Nureha had to keep her eyes wide open. Indicus told the truth. But she could not bring herself to say it out loud. Nureha knew better than anyone else how filthy and disgusting she was.

But knowing it yourself and someone bringing it up were two different matters.

"Because you are a princess that looks nice from afar but is far from nice."

Indicus pulled Nureha up by her ears, threatening to tear the fox ears off of the glaring Nureha.

"That's why I told you it is troubling for you to run off to Akiba, Nureha. Please use some common sense. Things are different from your time in the saloon. You have a castle filled with mannequins you collected now. I am going to secure the Yamato server properly this time. Isn't that our deal, Nureha?"

Nureha's hope and dreams.

A dream she bet everything on so she wouldn't have to go back to that place.

She was literally willing to do whatever it took to not go back. That's why she teamed up with Indicus. This was Nureha's castle, the city that never slept with its bright lights and wonderful reputation.

"You want to make a home of your own?"

Nureha nodded defiantly in order to hide her weak side from Indicus.

"Is that so. The Conference of the Ten is about to begin."

Indicus seemed to have lost interest in the current Nureha. It was impossible for Nureha to attend all the meetings too, she had no interest in the actual operation of the guild.

"Because you are our honourable princess. Allow me to bear the message on your behalf. Because you are our precious guild master, Nureha."

Indicus' footsteps grew distant as she left after leaving some sympathetic words as a parting gift.

Nureha was losing herself in her cursed past and self loathing, curling even more tightly into a ball and hugging her tail close.

Her extremities felt painful and cold. The blanket wrapped around her body felt heavy and didn't bring her any warmth.

Her heartbeat grew erratic, her vision turned dark like an anemic attack.

Terrible experiences and shameful recollections welled up, threatening to pull Nureha back to the old world. Indicus' remarks were spot on, forcing Nureha to fight the puppet-like figures alone.

But a hint of a smile grew on Nureha's lips.

'... That's right, a dirty woman like you will only be able to make a contract with someone like me.'

That's not true.

Things are different now.

Such a contract was just a verbal agreement that you couldn't bring yourself to voice out. It was even less binding than remarks between strangers who happened to meet on the streets. Aside from her contract with Indicus, Nureha made another promise with someone else.

'... it is better to be your enemy, your wish would more likely be fulfilled this way.'

The young man whom Indicus had dismissed as useless left these parting words for Nureha, offering some meager support for her.

The dull rings of the bell from somewhere far away told her it was 9pm.

The hands on the face of the clock seemed to be clogged with glue, moving so slow that the night seemed endless. The bodies of Adventurers were able to move effortlessly even when they felt sleepy. This physical advantage became the lock that trapped Nureha in the dungeon of nightfall. She alternated endlessly between dozing off and waking up startled.

Nureha waged her battle tonight in her room as usual. "One day, I will definitely..." Nureha uttered this prayers as she fell into shallow slumber.

Part 2

A group of men and women gathered in the weird room.

Ornaments adorned the pillars and drapes hung on the walls. Flowers were displayed from vases with delicate designs, the tables and chairs were plated with gold. But they paled in comparison to the lively congregation.

The 8 members with colorful personalities and their posse.

"Where did Indicus go?"

A man wearing clothes like a court official's and glasses asked.

"She went to visit our princess. It shouldn't take long. Don't worry, Zerudeyusu."

The woman in military attire replied.

"It has been a while since the appointed time of 'when the moon rises' right?"

"The princess has always been like this."

"Those two should just marry each other."

The young voices filled with arrogance joined in with interest, mixing with one another.

This room was shaped like a stairwell, with the steps about 4 cm apart . Instead of steps, it was closer to a series of platforms with ascending height, an interesting room. Each platform had an unique style, bringing with it an unique flavor.

There were leather couches and chairs on most platforms, some had tables and bookshelves. There were ten platforms. The arched doors at the edges of the room were also placed at differing heights for each platform. The positions of the doors also reflected the status of the owner of each platform. The unorthodox structure of the room represented the relationships among the group.

Kazu hugged his sword and sat on his chair, surveying the room. This was the Conference of the Ten. This was the meeting that decided the policies of the south, the meeting of its core group.

The attendees of the Conference of the Ten were known as the ten seats or seat generals.

There were only two absentees. The guild master Nureha and Indicus who went to get her.

Indicus should be showing up soon. But it was hard to say whether Nureha would show up. She was whimsical and seemed uninterested in the operations of the guild, missing most meetings of such nature. For a mammoth organization, the decision of the founder and leader Nureha was unnecessary for everyday operations. The members had grown used to the absence of Nureha.

This was a periodical Conference of the Ten. Kazu was not aware of any special issues to be discussed.

But that didn't mean he could let his guard down.

The relationships between the seat generals were complicated. It was unique as the guild was formed by absorbing all the Adventurers in the west of Yamato. It was fundamentally different from a guild formed by friends or people with similar interest in MMOs such as Elder Tales. This colossal organisation made from lots of guilds had the goal of helping the Adventurers survive in this alternate world. It had been with this goal in mind from the very beginning.

Although there were individuals that called for equality similar to normal guilds, the fact remained that they were divided into various cliques. People with a normal level of street smarts were able to understand this.

And there was more.

To found such a gigantic guild, Nureha had pulled the Guards from the south to her side from the very beginning. The Guards from the south were under the jurisdiction of the Itsuki clan. It was an order that worked for the People

of the Land from the very start.

As the guild master, Nureha obtained the status and power that matched her position, the 'Councillor of the West'.

The senate that ruled alongside the Itsuki clan had also displayed great interest in the rise of Nureha and wanted to get on her good side.

Minami was built on the delicate balance between the cliques among the Adventurers, the Itsuki clan and the senate of the People of the Land.

Kazu represented one of these factions.

The security organisation 'Wolves of Mibu' kept Minami safe, keeping bribery and fraud at bay.

But in actual fact, it was Kazu's private army.

'Wolves of Mibu' was set up by Kazu and his allies, determined to stop the corruption in the south. Their influence was limited in Minami, but they managed to obtain a seat within the Conference of the Ten as an official department within the guild.

Behind Kazu were two bodyguards dressed in black. Few seat generals attended meetings with guards.

Bringing guards was meaningless for this conference. It was just a superficial front.

Kazu squinted his eyes and looked towards the seat on the top platform.

The top seat was a delicately crafted throne for a queen that seemed to be from a fairy tale.

This empty seat belonged to the guild master of Plant hwyaden, Nureha.

One step down was the tea server and silver cart. A round seat that appeared unused. There was no one there, but it actually belonged to the no. 2 seat of the council. It was the seat of the maid Indicus.

Both of them were still absent.

The meeting would probably begin when Indicus showed up.

The 3rd platform was spacious, with a chair that looked practical flanked by large file cabinets. A man with glasses was filling in numbers and instructions on a form. He had a mean and squeamish feel about him. He raised his head and blurted out tacky comments from time to time. The 3rd seat known as the spy tower, Jack.

The man in charge of finance and development, the iron blooded minister.

Further down a woman in military dress relaxed on her seat, with wine bottles littered on the floor. The fourth seat Mistal Torti, general of the east. The strongest general from the senate and the commander in chief of the People of the Land army vanguard.

"Another idle day without any scent of blood. I am rotting here. I have so much time, I won't mind waiting for the moon to set if I get to battle."

She maintained her beauty even after the age of thirty. Instead of the rigidness of a military woman, she had the swagger of a cold criminal. Sitting in the middle of a 2 person couch, she rested her arms over the back of the couch in a relaxed manner.

"Didn't you came here for the high grade wine, Lander?"

An Adventurer of immense proportions teased while seated in his leather chair. The fifth seat. The general of the south, Nakarurano. His armor that was comparable to construction machines showed everyone clearly that he was a Guardian.

Mistal did not take any offence at his words, replying "That's right" without much thought.

"That's smooth." Nakarurano replied with a bitter face and raised the empty glass in his hand. A maid with a presence as faint as dirt on the wall appeared like a spirit and poured wine into the glass.

These two generals were in charge of offensive warfare.

They led the People of the land army and the Adventurer army respectively.

Mistal was ranked higher among the ten seats because the Adventurers in the council wanted to appease the elders in the senate. In terms of actual military might, Nakarurano's army was actually several times more powerful than Mistal's army. In the old world, Nakarurano was the guild master of the strongest guild in Kansai, 'Howling'. His dominance in the past still had influence among the factions in Plant hwyaden.

"Getting sleepy here. Really, why are we having the conference at night."

The 6th seat 'Prophet Quon' complained as he stretched his back.

"You are always sleepy, even in the day."

Zerude commented without lifting his head from his books. At first glance, he looked like a normal guy in shirt and jeans you could find in any corner on the streets. The only fantasy theme clothing is the cloak on his shoulder to ward off the cold.

"I am just standing by for the 'GM call'."

The other participants laughed bitterly upon hearing this.

The young man Quon had neither the ability nor interest in becoming one of the seat generals. But when Elder Tales was just a game, he was a game master. Game masters had game avatars similar to Adventurers, and would investigate any reported game errors and mediate any disputes between players, the operating staff in the game world. In simpler terms, they were customer service officers.

As an employed staff of F.O.E, he was well versed in how the game operated and was knowledgeable in many aspects of the game. He did not log in from the special mainframe from the company, but was online from his home computer; that's why he was affected by the Catastrophe as well. Although most of his abilities as a game master had been sealed, there was still a chance that he could contribute with his deep understanding of the game. That was the reason why he was one of the seat generals.

'GM call' was one of the game master abilities Quon retained, allowing him to receive pop up notifications of events happening within the Yamato server. He was also able to receive messages from F.O.E as well, but he had not been contacted since the Catastrophe. The event notification had been limited to timed and triggered events.

"Are you telling us that the connection with the upper world is fading?"

One step below Kazu, the old man in the eighth seat said with stifled laughter.

"Shut up. The continued supervision of system messages was decided by the conference right?"

The old man laughed as he watched Quon's bashful attitude. There was a hint of cloudy cruelty behind his laughing eyes. The 8th seat, the Sage of Mirror Lake, Jerad Gan. The leading authority on People of the Land magic and history. With his knowledge and magic powers, he pushed the frontier of development of new techniques together with Zerude.

"Our princess... will probably be absent tonight too."

The ninth seat Roreiru Dawn, the chief Sentinal, mumbled to himself when the talented beauty dressed in a maid outfit, Indicus, entered the hall. Her footsteps akin to striking the floor resonated like a bell announcing the beginning of the show.

"Let's start the Conference of the Ten. Let's begin with the report on the social welfare facility in the city."

Indicus forewent the opening address and started the conference abruptly. And this topic had been on the top of the agenda recently. Kazu held his breath like a submarine, keeping his heart cool and collected.

Minami was a peaceful and prosperous city.

But this was built on the exploitation of the People of the Land. There were 10,000 Adventurers living in Minami; the number of People of the Land was 3 times this number. Although the People of the Land operated many eateries and lodging rentals, most of them did this as serfs.

Serfs were People of the Land who provided services for the Adventurers. It was popular as it relieved Adventurers from the hassle of everyday life chores while providing the People of the Land with relatively high remuneration. But this in turn led to the development of troublesome issues. The prosperity of Minami was constructed with the cover up of this filth and corruption in mind.

The conference carried on as Kazu's mind drifted away.

The biggest policy the governing body of Minami was pushing for was the administration of Guildpass.

The People of the Land residing in Minami and affiliated with Plant hwyaden could collect their pass at the state run office. The Guildpass was divided into many ranks, allowing the holder to enjoy free services at corresponding restaurants and hotels befitting their status. This would eliminate the need for members to bring a wallet when going out. The Guildpass was issued free of charge and could be renewed every 3 months, which would contribute to the economical development of Minami in the future.

Kazu renewed his resolve as he listened to the glamorous report.

Things were definitely going to get ugly.

He understood the benefits of Guildpass. It would guarantee the minimum quality of life for Adventurers who were avoiding fighting monsters for loot. It would also enable more meaningful policies for Plant hwyaden, such as purchasing management. But this came at the expense of the People of the Land. Wolves of Mibu existed to uphold justice in the city. This meant protecting the weak. In order to lessen the suffering of the People of the Land who were being ignored by the Adventurers, Kazu's group fought on.

The conference breezed through the survey report of Nakasu and the raiding grounds, and moved on to the situation in Akiba.

"Seems like Akiba is sending a campaign army towards the northeast."

"That appears to be so."

Nakarunado replied to Indicus' query.

"It consists of 5 legions led by the 'Berserker' Krusty. Agent One reports that members from Blackwords, HiRyuji and Mad Hatters are also taking part."

Both Akiba and Minami were troubled by the affairs with the People of the Land in different ways.

Just like Minami working together with the leaders of clan Itsuki, Akiba was collaborating with the People of the Land in the League of Freedom Towns. The seat generals felt the deciding factor was the speed difference in political change between Akiba and Minami.

Minami was able to secure a stable social environment, better quality of life and development of technology before Akiba, and had outstanding achievements in every facet of life. For the Adventurers trapped in this alternate world, Minami provided a stable livelihood that was highly valued by the players. That was the happiness of Adventurers living in Minami.

"Black Heart Glasses is missing too."

The tenth seat pulled up his sleep mask and chipped in.

The 'Transforming Jester' was lounging on his beach chair made from canvas and a wooden frame. His brief words seemed to suck the life out of the conference, quieting everyone down.

"Black Heart Glasses is missing too," the tenth seat repeated as the room remained strangely silent. "I am not sure if he is with the campaign to the northeast, but he is definitely covering his tracks."

His smile appeared more ferocious than delirious. Wearing a cloak with tattered edges, the skinny Summoner was a member of the Debauchery Tea party, KR.

KR smiled mischievously as he looked up at the others from the lowest platform.

"What should we do, Indicus? The noise refusing to stick to your plans is running off again."

Part 3

Naotsugu closed the heavy wooden door and dusted off the snow on his body.

For Naotsugu, the snow storm brewing outside was just a gentle breeze with snowflakes. It should be early noon right now, but the thick clouds made the surroundings dark and cold.

Thanks to his anti-freeze equipment, Naotsugu was able to move in the snow, but it still hindered his movements. As a Guardian, Naotsugu was covered in full armor from head to toe, not equipment fit for traveling in the snow. Naotsugu was able to maneuver in such adverse weather because of his body as an Adventurer.

"Naotsugu...?"

"I'm back..."

Naotsugu replied to Shiroe's voice which came from the depths of the cabin.

Naotsugu unfastened and removed his gauntlets. These gloves were a state of the art production class item that didn't exist when Elder Tales was just a game. This hand made armor was more versatile than loots the level 90 Naotsugu was able to obtain in raids. As they were made by hand after the Catastrophe, he was unable to take them off with the use of the game menu.

Instead of a gauntlet, it felt closer to being a weapon in terms of weight. Naotsugu took off and stored his equipment in his magic bag one by one. Under his imposing armor were indoor clothes and 3/4 pants. He was as casual now as he was back in the old world.

On this snowy mountain, the builders of this cabin were very practical with their design. The house was made from 2 layers of thick walls, with hay stuffed between them.

Reinforced by the thick curtains, the cabin maintained a comfortable temperature.

After taking off his thick boots, Naotsugu stuck his toes inside his indoor shoes. With his habits of taking his socks off when he returned home, others tended to tease him for acting like an old man. But he kept this habit since he was a kid, so he disliked it when others pointed this out.

"How was it?"

"All is well. The wind is blowing and the snow is falling."

"I don't think the snow will stop even if you cry."

"Crying is for shrimps."

"Don't talk about others behind their backs."

In Japanese terms, this room was about 10 tatami mats big.

The fireplace was burning brightly. Shiroe was sitting on a thick rug, surrounded by dozens of notes and maps. Naotsugu recognized some of them. The map of the region they were in... Notes and legends were written in red words, summarizing Naotsugu's observations from the past week.

Although it was warm and comfortable in the cabin, they had been away from their friends in Akiba for about a week. Naotsugu looked around moodily.

"Where is the tiny old man?"

"He is not an old man yet. I think he is around 30 years old?"

"But he looks just like one when he laughs."

Shiroe was not wearing his trademark white cloak today. He carefully tidied his logs without looking up at Naotsugu.

"Need help?"

"Thanks but no need. I will be done really soon."

"That so, alright."

He must be focusing.

In order to not disturb Shiroe, Naotsugu took a seat on the fur rug.

"..."

"..."

Shiroe took out a notebook and placed it beside his logs to write something down. There were no typewriters or computers in this world. Although Shiroe seemed to have a hard time consolidating his reports, Naotsugu would definitely be rejected if he offered to help. Shiroe had always been that stubborn.

He's been this way since the day they met. Naotsugu started to reminiscence.

In the Debauchery Tea Party days, the topic of hanging out together for a meal came up. Since this was a server based game, the members must be residing somewhere in Japan. It was unlikely for everyone to join in, but there were still 5 members living in Kanto.

Shiroe was drinking black tea the first time they met.

Is that Oolong tea? Naotsugu asked, and then received an explanation of the difference between oolong and black tea from Shiroe. It took 30 minutes, and somehow led to the topic of the political situation in Taiwan and tea investment in general. Back then, the big news was the European Union going through the 'Vital Fall', so normal college students wouldn't know about the subject of Taiwan politics and the economy of tea.

This offline meeting was the start of Naotsugu and Shiroe's friendship.

Both of them were in university and lived about an hour's bicycle ride away from each other. Having friends not from your school was also a precious relationship. He would bring Shiroe who preferred to stay indoors to hang out from time to time.

There were times when they had been blindsided by the willfulness of Kanami.

Go to the fish paste factory in Odawara. They were on the verge of losing it when Kanami said that. But it was a fun trip when they went over and more importantly, the fish paste was delicious. Naotsugu thought that Kanami's character and penchant for tasty food was top notch.

And so, Naotsugu and Shiroe spent a lot of time together.

Having gotten used to the silent Shiroe, Naotsugu stretched out his legs and relaxed. He did this from time to time when he was in school, and was still doing this in Log Horizon.

The heat from the fireplace radiated to his toes which had been buried in the snow. The numbness melted away as he regained the warmth in his body.

Naotsugu twisted his body and took out a metallic flask and cups from his magic bag deftly.

He poured Mog milk into the cup. Crushing the Mog fruit and adding it to milk gave it a taste similar to banana milk on earth.

Naotsugu grunted as he passed one of the cups to Shiroe, who took it and mumbled "Kay". They drank the Mog milk that was slightly too sweet. That's what friends were for. There were quiet times, and there were times when they talked passionately about stuff.

"Shiroe and the old man's snowy mountain prison party."

Naotsugu was muttering nonsense not because he was malicious, but because he was bored.

"Do you miss the crowd, Naotsugu?"

"Yeah. There is nothing around here."

"It feels really rural."

Naotsugu was amazed by Shiroe's reply.

The cabin was a restricted zone, with the snowy mountain zone just outside being a square field zone 64km wide. There was only one Adventurer in this field zone. He checked before entering the cabin with his Border Patrol ability, so that was definitely it. This was not a rural area, it was the wilderness. Tear Stone was like a deserted island in the Yamato server.

"Speaking of which, where were you born, Shiroe?"

"Tokyo."

Naotsugu sighed when he heard this curt reply. Tokyo people were really troublesome. They couldn't even differentiate between a rural area and the wilderness.

The speechless Naotsugu used his arms as a pillow and lay down.

About ten days ago, he received a request from Shiroe to watch over their home. He planned to leave Akiba for a trip, that's why he was asking Log Horizon for assistance. Naotsugu rejected him in a second and ended up here.

He didn't ask where they were going or what they were going to do. But he knew there was going to be trouble so he tagged along. The others might think Shiroe could make the trip alone, but Naotsugu knew Shiroe would need backup. He could tell just by looking at Shiroe's face.

If everyone understood that it was necessary, Shiroe would open up and call for help from the others. If it were necessary for everyone to join in, he would not hesitate to ask the rest to join in. Because it was hard to explain why he had to do this himself.

Naotsugu thought Shiroe had grown since the Crescent Burger incident, but it seemed that it was not that simple for someone to do things contrary to their nature.

Naotsugu thought that Shiroe was too stubborn, but he felt that this was his nature.

This was a weakness of Shiroe although he had many good points to balance this out. But the problem was that Shiroe held back too much. With his intelligence, he should push his dumb friends harder to stride forward. As Shiroe's old friend, Naotsugu thought he qualified.

When Shiroe strode forward willfully, he was usually able to achieve a bright future.

If Shiroe intended to watch such sceneries, Naotsugu did not want to give up his front row seat.

"I think it is about time to explain why I have to be imprisoned in a cabin on this snowy mountain."

"You are not trapped. We are just living in this secluded place."

"Shiroe, that is why you have no luck with girls."

"I mean it is peaceful here."

With Shiroe's nature, he was actually half serious in his reply, what a pain.

"... I'm holed up here because I don't want anyone to know my whereabouts. There are no problems yet, but considering future events, I don't want others to preempt my plans."

Shiroe ended the jokes and explained slowly.

"Anyway, the goal this round is money. I'm looking for a way to generate lots of money. In order to do this, I have to convince someone."

"That old man?"

Naotsugu recalled their companion. The small sized People of the Land elf sage, just staying next door. Literally.

"Ah, that is someone else. ReGan is a chess piece for the battle this time. He is part of the persuading party, I can't do this alone. He is famous here after all."

"I can't tell from his looks."

"Does the Sage of Mirror Lake ring a bell?"

Naotsugu understood now. Shiroe was talking about that guy.

The Sage of Mirror Lake was a well known NPC in the MMORPG Elder Tales. But even so, Naotsugu had never seen him appear in the game before. He was a sage that was referenced often in the rumors and legends of the game. In the raid '9 Prisons of Heroes' he took part in during the Debauchery Tea Party days, he was mentioned in the background lore.

"So that guy really exists."

"Yes he does."

"But why are we in the deep mountains to think about money making plans? Why not borrow some from the Round Table Council if we need cash?"

"Well," Shiroe crossed his legs and sighed with a troubled look. "The amount is rather big this time."

Naotsugu started to feel a headache.

The 'rather big' Shiroe was saying could not be trusted. The 'rather big' he mentioned last time when he schemed to buy the guild building could make anyone's face pale.

"Exactly how much?"

"The total is 80 trillion."

Deranged, you couldn't describe this amount in any other way.

Even if every Adventurer in Yamato server had 10,000 gold, you couldn't reach that amount by pooling everyone's money. Not just Yamato server, it couldn't be done if you added in the wealth of every Adventurer in the world, an impractical amount. Naotsugu looked at Shiroe slack jawed. Shiroe furrowed his brows and mumbled to himself.

Naotsugu understood when he looked at the mumbling Shiroe. Shiroe wasn't joking or having any other intentions in mind. He was seriously contemplating how to earn this amount.

"So, can we earn it?"

"Not all of it, we will need to divide it lot of times... bit by bit."

It was still an astronomical figure no matter how small a bit he divided it, Shiroe smiled bitterly.

"This will be tough. Tell me more about the scheme you are thinking about."

"There are no schemes. We will simply have to beg for it. We have to convince him no matter what."

"Convince who? How?"

As the two of them sipped Mog milk and conversed, the door to the room beside them opened and a robed man appeared.

"Master Shiroe. Seems like our guest has arrived."

A People of the Land mage with shifty eyes tapped Naotsugu's shoulder enthusiastically as he giggled. ReGan had ill manners even for a People of the Land, which annoyed Naotsugu. ReGan continued nonchalantly.

"Please let Sir Naotsugu join us. Even though we are still have a long way to go, the negotiation Master Shiroe is hoping for is about to begin. This is really amazing. In a way, negotiation is war level, no, national level magic."

What do you mean by national level? Naotsugu's query was interrupted.

Because the door to the cabin had been knocked on.

Just 20 minutes ago, there shouldn't have been any Adventurers within a 10km radius of this area. So was this a People of the Land? But could a People of the Land make their way to the snowy Tear Stone?

Under the watchful eyes of Shiroe and ReGan, Naotsugu drew his sword from his magic bag and approached the door cautiously.

Part 4

"Shiroe, your guest is here."

Shiroe stuffed the maps and documents into his magic bag before Naotsugu brought in the guest.

He was already expecting the guest and had prepared tea and cups near the fireplace.

(So it turned out this way...) Naotsugu looked baffled when he returned. Although the guest was contrary to Shiroe's prediction, it was still one of the possible candidates.

"Please take a seat."

It was rude to ignore Naotsugu, but Shiroe kept his priorities, ushering the guest to the solid wooden chair.

"It's been a bit of a challenge to hike up this snowy mountain."

That's what he said, although there were no signs of snow sticking to his shirt. The young man with purple eye pupils, Kinjo of the Kunie clan.

"Have you been doing well?"

"Things are going smoothly."

Shiroe smiled at Kinjo's reply. He sighed in his heart, knowing that this was going to be tough.

Shiroe had been waiting in this desolate cabin to meet the representative of the Kunie to negotiate. There were several reasons he chose this out of place mountain, one of them being that it was close to the base of operation for the Kunie.

(... So it is this man.)

Shiroe felt that this was going to be difficult.

He knew that dealing with the Kunie clan would be hard.

Shiroe came to know about this mysterious clan when he was doing his bank transactions. The banking service was one of the functions that existed in Elder Tales that provided convenient service for the Adventurers. It provided storage facilities for the safekeeping of cash and items. There was no need to go to a specific bank for withdrawal, you could make your withdrawal at any banking outlet in Yamato.

This teleportation technology that differed from the spell Call of Home or the inter-city transport gate was not solely used for banking transactions for the banks.

It was also implemented for personal mail and small package delivery service. It was also used in the bazaar that was open to public. The security system that was installed on most streets also belonged to the Kunie.

The players of Elder Tales, or rather the players after the Catastrophe, took these services for granted and treated them as public utilities. When the Round Table Council was formed, Shiroe said that "Adventurers need the People of the Land to survive". He was already aware of the existence of such a clan.

But he didn't know back then that the services were provided by the mysterious Kunie clan.

After the formation of the Round Table Council, the council led by Shiroe made contact with the Kunie clan. This was accomplished easily. Shiroe met Kinjo, who was in charge of the Kunie clan in the Akiba region, at that point. But there had been no progress after that.

He found out that the Kunie clan provided all sorts of service in the Yamato region. And they were all crucial facilities that Adventurers could not do without. Shiroe had also met their representative for Akiba, Kinjo. But that was all.

Although he did not bluntly ignore Shiroe or display hostility, Kinjo managed to keep all of Shiroe's advances at bay with his steady smile and words.

And the fact was not far from what Shiroe imagined. Adventurers could not live on without the People of the Land, but the People of the Land would be able to scrape by without the Adventurers. They might not be able to prosper on

this earth with savage monsters roaming the land, but they could survive with the use of no-combat zone and magic technology. And the clan that had the power to do so was the Kunie clan.

For the Kunie clan, Adventurers were unnecessary. This had limited almost all the cards Shiroe could play.

But Shiroe had strived on and collected intelligence to build up his cards. But his opponent was Kinjo, the young man with an experienced profile. Kinjo had probably sensed what Shiroe was plotting and sealed off all information related to the Kunie. The strength of this clan, the knowledge they held, their base of operation, ideals, goals... He was unable to gather further intelligence from Kinjo.

Almost all the intelligence Shiroe had of the Kunie clan was provided by ReGan.

"This is Sage ReGan, you must have heard about him."

"Of course. First time we met. I am Kinjo, I manage the counter for the Kunie."

"Nice to meet you. This is the first time I meet with the Kunie clan."

ReGan waved his hands cheerfully in response.

Kinjo was also all smiles.

"It is a rare day indeed. Representing the Adventurers is 'The Archmage of the Tea Party', Master Shiroe of Log Horizon. I even get to meet Master ReGan, the Sage of Mirror Lake. It is a great honor to be invited to such a historically meaningful conference. Very few in the history of the Kunie were able to receive such honor. My ancestors would never have expected such a day to come."

Shiroe was troubled by Kinjo's reply.

This young man named Kinjo bore no hostility towards Shiroe or the Adventurers. He was not taciturn either, and definitely understood the things they were saying. He was simply not disclosing information, and was keeping it under wraps with his silver tongue.

Shiroe sighed at the thought of the coming negotiation. He had hoped to speak with the representative of the Kunie. He had conveyed his request personally through the Akiba branch leader of the Kunie, who was Kinjo. He didn't expect him to be the one to travel all this way to this desolate cabin.

But Shiroe sensed that this could open up other possibilities. But just as Shiroe was about to test it out, ReGan had started to converse enthusiastically with Kinjo.

"You have made this conference more honorable with your presence. Kunie... a mysterious clan supporting the all the counties in Yamato from behind the scenes, inheriting powerful ancient magic technology. And Sir Kinjo is the head of this clan. I am brimming with anticipation."

"Anticipation?"

"That's right, Master Shiroe here is an existence akin to a Jack in the Box."

"Fufu, that is amazing."

(Just stop the show already.)

Shiroe injected his emotions into his glare at ReGan, who continued to smile with curiosity. He was not oblivious. This humorous People of the Land sage did not plan to help Shiroe anyway.

"So..."

"Fufufu."

Shiroe glared at ReGan who was smiling and started the negotiation.

"The things I hope to discuss with Mr Kinjo are as stated in the letter."

"You want to talk about financing, specifically loans, correct?"

It was that simple.

He just wanted money from Kinjo.

"Since we are going straight to the point, this will save a lot of trouble."

"Correct, we will save a lot of trouble."

"Thank you for accommodating me."

Shiroe was hoping to hold the negotiation in Akiba. The core members of the Round Table Council were on a campaign to raid the Citadel of Seven Falls right now, leaving Akiba vulnerable to attacks. He sensed that something was going to happen. Even though Soujirou was around to hold the fort, Shiroe was still reluctant to leave Akiba.

He was holding the conference here because of the way Kinjo was stonewalling him, although Kinjo did not outright reject him. He was simply kept at bay with meaningless talks, the topics being kicked around like a ball. In terms of negotiation experience, Shiroe with his graduate student qualifications had no chance against this professional old timer.

But Kinjo was diving straight into the point this round, surprising Shiroe and earning his gratitude.

"No, please don't mind me. Saving the trouble is also important. For the Kunie, this is a matter of grave importance."

"Ha..."

"Since you are here, that means you have some level of understanding about the Kunie."

"That's right. I heard about from Mr ReGan."

"Ah. I am impressed that this is in the records of Mirror Lake."

"It is only polite to keep notes."

Shiroe replied with a bitter face.

This was not being polite.

According to ReGan's research of his ancient texts, the knowledge that the Kunie clan was based in this zone had become a card for Shiroe to negotiate with. 'I know where your home base is', a move that was threatening by nature. Shiroe knew this bordered on being malicious. He did not forbid or hesitate in doing this, but Shiroe definitely didn't decide to do this gleefully.

He was frustrated when forming the Round Table Council.

He was on the verge of lecturing the major guilds who were ignoring these obvious issues. He was so frustrated that he didn't even care about using intimidation to get his way.

But the Kunie clan did not give up the duty they inherited since ancient times. At least they didn't plan to.

"Although I really hope to provide assistance to Master Shiroe of the Round Table Council, please allow me to reject."

"Why?"

"Because this goes against our obligations to our ancestors."

Shiroe sighed.

Shiroe knew from the beginning that this was going to be hard. That's why he invited ReGan and did all sorts of investigation to prepare for this. Their findings indicated that there were no records of the Kunie banking service providing loans, investing or financing any business. They simply provided cash deposit and withdrawal facilities.

Shiroe recalled the previous meeting he had with Kinjo. Equity ratio, credit, trust fund... terms that were common sense for earthlings like Shiroe were foreign concepts for Kinjo. If Shiroe explained them, Kinjo would be able to understand what these phrases meant, but that was it.

The entity known as banks in Akiba were not the same thing as banks on earth. This was the conclusion Shiroe and the others had drawn. It was closer to a storage facility, not a financial organization.

That was baffling.

The fact that real banks didn't exist in this world could be rationalized. But the inability to obtain loans was too unnatural. Shiroe was not a professional so he was not too sure, but the act of borrowing money should have a long history. On further thought, Shiroe remembered that the Romans loaned money. Rome existed in the BC era. For this world that seemed to be in the middle ages, the progress of civilization seemed too slow if the concept of loans did not exist.

Shiroe couldn't get a straight answer from ReGan when he explained all of this to him. Going by the account of the People of the Land Elissa, it was very rare to see the act of borrowing money between the nobles and the peasants.

She had not seen such acts of loans between peasants either.

That's why the merchants did not hold much authority in this world. Basically all trades were done between the aristocrats; the merchants just executed the trade and delivered the goods. People of the Land that were half noble and half merchant existed.

Also, the credibility of the currency did not lie with the nobles and royalty.

The aristocrats, who were the rulers, did not create the currency for market use. The currency was all 'discovered' when they defeated monsters. The money supply would increase if they continued defeating monsters. The currency in circulation in a country on earth was created and made legal tender by the government, but this concept did not apply here.

The credibility of the currency lay in its universality.

There was only one currency in circulation in this world. Gold, half gold and quarter gold were the units, there was no name for money. This was different from earth where USD and Euros were in circulation together; there was only one currency here. There was no need to give it a name. It was simply called gold, nuggets or coins. Shiroe thought that the currency was not limited to the Yamato server, and was applicable worldwide, making it legal tender in the whole world.

This meant that it had the credibility of 'not turning into junk no matter where you went'. The credibility had nothing to do with the military might of countries; it was simply because there were no other forms of currencies. In a sense, it was more credible than the currencies of earth which might lose their value if the countries distributing it went bankrupt. Even if the League of Freedom Towns Eastal or the Holy Empire Westelande crumbled, the gold in Maihama would still retain its value.

On the other hand, the rare metal the currency was made from held value as well, but smelting them requires extra effort. But Shiroe was convinced that the main source of credibility for this currency still lay in its universality.

There were issues with the Kunie's bank as well. Although they were no different than a safe-box, its security was top notch. The money you deposited was guaranteed to be safe. Most of the bank was situated in its own unique zone, and guards were a common sight. The bank also had unknown ID authentication technology. It was entirely possible to deposit cash in one bank and withdraw from another branch immediately. It also included the sale of zones and the collection of upkeep cost. All these convenient services were available by adopting gold as your currency of choice.

This system was too convenient and self autonomous to not take advantage of. But there were other reasons why the governors did not create their own forms of currency.

"We can get gold when we defeat monsters right, Mr Kinjo?"

"Yes, you are right."

Shiroe dove straight to the point.

"We can obtain hundreds of gold by looting chests in the dungeons."

"Fortune favors the brave."

"Since the Kunie do not provide loans, what if we find the person distributing all this gold and take it before it is given out. What do you think about this method?"

Part 5

ReGan was excited.

He befriended Shiroe of Log Horizon in the Palace of Eternal Ice, and was here on his invitation. Shiroe was like the arrival of a hurricane, bringing the house down.

ReGan held high regards for the young man with eyes that seemed to gaze both into the past and into the future. Just like the time when ReGan heated the library as he explained the findings he devoted his whole life to, World Fraction. This young man managed to grasp all of this in one night, a rare talented Archmage.

ReGan watched Shiroe's profile so intensely he seemed to have forgotten how to breathe.

Shiroe, the young man who introduced himself to be from Log Horizon, was an Adventurer who made his living through the use of magic. Adventurers were strong. They were entities that could overwhelm People of the Land. Be it warriors, scouts, healing magic or mages, Adventurers were geniuses at whatever they did.

All Adventurers were elites, but there were only a select few who were worthy of the title of Archmage. Although Adventurers were powerful, their abilities were often too specialized for use in aspects other than battle. For the knowledgeable mages who explored the mysteries of the world, magic used for fighting was nothing more than parlor tricks.

Shiroe was one of the few Adventurers who deserved the title of Archmage.

ReGan thought that there were four paths to sage-hood in this world.

All these routes were independent and did not intercept.

In this feudal era, technology and knowledge were secrets not to be divulged. The knowledge was then passed down as secrets, which were not made known publicly by those who inherited it.

The knowledge of this world was retained in this manner, and there were four ways to reach the pinnacle of knowledge.

First of these would be the path of research as a People of the Land, which ReGan belonged to.

The options to study openly were available through the academy of Tsukuba, to research in the shadows would be the way of the Mirror Lake. As a Sage of Mirror Lake, he kept watch over the 'Forgotten Lake of Books', also known as the Mirror Lake. They were students who challenged the known perception of the world.

The second way was the Adventurers. As the Sage of Mirror Lake, ReGan thought the magic and knowledge of Adventurers were totally different from People of the Land. Their magic was powerful, but was essentially similar to People of the Land. But even so, their knowledge seemed to have a source that was out of this world.

Did the Adventurers seal a part of their soul in an alternate world? ReGan believed that there were signs that shows this. And this alternate world might be linked with the golden era. After the Catastrophe, the Adventurers came up with all sorts of miraculous discoveries and inventions. It was already common knowledge to the mages of Tsukuba and ReGan that these discoveries were linked to the super technology of the golden era.

The third method was to use the powers of the Ancients. The ones who could easily attain powers beyond the limits of the People of the Land were the Adventurers and the Ancients. Just like Adventurers, the Ancients were heroes that were beyond the understanding of the People of the Land. Those who were on the level of the People of the Land were humans, elves, dwarves, half-elves, werewolves, wolf-fangs, fox-tails and race of ceremony.

The Ancients also inherited secrets from days of old, a close society that protected the world as bands of knights.

The last way available would be the path of the Kunie clan.

They were shrouded in too many mysteries, so the contents of ReGan's knowledge about them were all speculations. Although they were People of the Land, they were not academics like Tsukuba academy or Mirror Lake. Inheriting the technology passed to them for countless eons, their influence went beyond Yamato and affected continents beyond the ocean.

They had similarities with Mirror Lake which collected and studied the knowledge of the past, but the Kunie did not make this knowledge available to others. The key difference from the researchers of Tsukuba and Mirror Lake was their lock down of information. They did not actively engage People of the Land or conduct research. They had no curiosity, a clan that shied away from contact.

Mirror Lake which focused on all types of knowledge had attempted to contact the Kunie clan dozens of times. But there had been zero records of success in terms of information exchange.

A member of the Kunie, Log Horizon's Shiroe and ReGan being seated at the same table was a cause of excitement for ReGan.

Shiroe's words had shocked the Kunie's leader.

Kinjo let out a deep breath, wearing his emotionless mask once again in silence. He stayed that way for a long time.

"Master Shiroe, did you really think this was possible?"

After hearing the long awaited reply from Kinyou, Shiroe gave a small nod after stealing a glance at ReGan.

It's about time for me to step in, ReGan thought as he calmed himself and spoke.

"Shiroe has brought up a point that has never been mentioned before. But speaking of which, this is one of the unexplained mysteries of this world. This is a view point that will complement the Spirit Theory. The monsters are ever spawning. But where do their gold and loot come from? There must be some system in place that grants the monsters with these treasures. This is a new perspective that does not exist in the library of books in Mirror Lake. I am sure, I have browsed through all of them."

ReGan pushed the circlet with purple crystals on his head out of habit. This magic item gave ReGan a great sense of insight and memory retention. But it was still a metallic headgear, ReGan still couldn't get use to this circlet that had been passed down through the generations no matter how long he wore it.

But it would not be possible to complete the investigation this round without the aid of the magic circlet. Even with the circlet, they wouldn't be able to make any headway without the records left by ReGan's predecessor.

"The base of the Kunie and the gold that Shiroe mentioned were found in the records."

"..."

Kinjo kept up his emotionless mask.

ReGan was simply probing. That had always been the case. The men of Mirror Lake collated knowledge. New questions arose from the result of the collated knowledge. More information was needed to answer these queries. Working hard to answer these new questions, repeating this endless cycle.

"The logs state that there is a whirlpool of gold at the lowest level of the depths of Palm. Gold appears out of nowhere and disappears to nothingness, a winding river of gold and the graves of vanquished monsters. The Dead Spirit King raised an army of undead in order to seize the gold for himself. Records of this incident are still available. One of the defenders was the Sage of Mirror Lake 15 generations ago who sealed the passage in the depths of Palm."

This was a common request for the Sage of Mirror Lake.

The Sage of Mirror Lake stood to gain all sorts of knowledge and magical items by taking on such jobs. They usually had to handle cursed items and equipment that were extremely dangerous if used in the wrong way. The owners of such relics, mostly nobles, brought them to Mirror Lake for sealing.

The reputation of the Mirror Lake grew because they were able to fulfill such requests, and they were happy to take on the task in order to collate more knowledge. Even if they were unable to learn anything new, getting their hands on such items meant that they had more experimental materials. Mirror Lake had a vested interest in learning sealing skills. Their techniques applied to both items as well as zones.

"I received the 'Key of Eternal Darkness' during my adventuring of the 9 Prisons of Heroes. This was something made by Mirror Lake."

ReGan handed the floor back to Shiroe when he heard Shiroe speak.

"According to the key, we obtained the rights to challenge the 9 Prisons of Heroes. This area was sealed by Mirror Lake's... I'm not sure how long ago, but it was definitely the predecessors of ReGan. And there were also several sealed danger zones. We have confirmed their location."

Kinjo was taken aback by Shiroe's statement.

ReGan's is a scholar, so his combat magic was very weak. Although he wouldn't lose to the knights of minor lords, it was only at the level of the People of the Land, he couldn't match the powers of Adventurers.

And so ReGan was escorted to the depths of the dungeon under the protection of Shiroe and his friend Naotsugu.

The records of Mirror Lake only mentioned that they were requested to seal the area, but did not explain the details of how it was done and what things they came across. When they reached the place, they found the giant bronze door and ReGan knew how to deactivate the seals with the deep sealing knowledge of Mirror Lake.

Although he did not really understand what Shiroe meant by 'unreleased zones', ReGan understood from this expedition that there were such sealed off areas all over the world. Not all of them were sealed by Mirror Lake, and these zones were areas and facilities with restricted access.

"You intend to borrow the money from the golden whirlpool?"

"That's right."

"You think it is related to the Kunie?"

"You are correct."

Kinjo seemed to have recovered his composure as he conversed with Shiroe.

"... So you are going to plunder the gold from that place? You intend to rob us, man from the Round Table?"

Kinjo's said with a cold voice without any trace of doubt.

Everything was clear.

There was a whirlpool of gold in the depths of Palm. And that place was related to the Kunie. There was no confirmation on this data, and the Kunie might have nothing to do with this. ReGan discussed this possibility with Shiroe, but had made contact with the Kunie on Shiroe's advice anyway.

This had confirmed a query he had.

The Kunie clan had something to do with the Spirit Theory.

There was no hard evidence, but judging from Kinjo's reaction, it couldn't be too far from the truth. The secrets of the Kunie held the answer to the intricate workings of this world. ReGan was overjoyed with this revelation. He was on the verge of literally jumping with joy. The Spirit Theory was the most important research that ReGan was working on. He felt like giving a toast, even though he could not drink wine.

But Shiroe's voice was bitter.

"That is why we wish to meet you here. We do not wish to be enemies with the Kunie. The Kunie are very important. Even if we want to use the money, we can't make any headway without the assistance of your clan."

"Why are you doing this? No, what do you intend to do with the gold, Master Shiroe?"

"If I explain, will there be any chance that you will help us?"

"I am sorry. The ancestors' will is to be followed."

"... Mr Kinjo."

ReGan glanced at Shiroe who was biting his lips and seemed to be holding something back, grasping onto any available possibility.

"Mr Kinjo. I understand about the will of your ancestors. Although this is just the Adventurer's way of thinking, I know this is an iron clad rule since ancient times. We are not asking you to break them. We don't intend to ask you to do anything forbidden. And that is why we need to know the limits of the rules."

"..."

"That's right. The Catastrophe changed the rules. This is a new age. It cannot be stopped. There must be..."

Kinjo closed his eyes, looking just like an iron bust.

Shiroe's explanation did not seem to reach Kinjo's heart.

ReGan's happiness had faded just like the setting sun. He didn't understand what was happening before his eyes. ReGan who had been schooled in magic since birth could feel that some matter that he didn't understand was crumbling. It was probably a thing known as negotiation. But ReGan thought that something that could not be expressed by the simple term negotiation was shattering.

3 of the 4 sages in this world were only gathered here, but they didn't achieve anything.

ReGan clenched his fist unconsciously.

Part 6

An icy atmosphere drifted in this room heated by a fireplace.

Naotsugu watched the back of Shiroe as he added wood into the fireplace. The tables had been shifted aside to make space for their sleeping bags.

This was the cabin in the mountains where their conference with Kinjo ended fruitlessly.

(What a lifeless back,) Naotsugu thought.

Shiroe's was always like this.

Shiroe stirred the flame with a stick. They were sleeping soon, that's why he was nursing the fire so carefully. But he looked helpless, as if he were being made to go round and round in circles.

Naotsugu speculated that Shiroe must be thinking about complicated stuff and unable to rest. From the discussion in the conference earlier, Shiroe appeared to be at a dead end. This seemed to be tougher than that time when they were forming the Round Table Council.

"Hey Shiroe."

"Yeah?"

"Enough, get some sleep."

"Yeah."

Shiroe shuffled to his sleeping bag and sat with his legs crossed.

Sleeping bags on earth were made from excellent materials, that's why they tended to be thin and convenient to carry. But such advanced insulation materials had not been invented yet, so the sleeping bags here were made from wool. Their insulation capability was much lower and they were uncomfortable to sleep in because of its thickness. But when combined with carpets made with long fur, it was comfortable to sit on.

"Shiroe, you want to drink some?"

Naotsugu showed Shiroe the warm sake he was pouring into his mug. Shiroe attempted to block out the smell by blowing air out of his nose and replied, "No thanks, I'm good."

Naotsugu thought that things would be easier to deal with if he had a drink, but he did not force the issue.

If it were up to Naotsugu, he would just drink the sake, sprawl out on the floor and sleep. But this was not Shiroe's style, and Naotsugu knew that he would pick himself up even if you left him alone. There was no need to intervene in this.

"So it didn't work..."

"Yeah."

Shiroe answered with a troubled expression.

Naotsugu didn't think this was a loss. He didn't know the details, but it seemed like Shiroe needed a huge amount of cash. It was not an amount that could be raised by Adventurers. The means and source of such an amount was very limited.

From the dialogue session with Kinjo of the Kunie clan, Naotsugu had a good idea of what the plan was.

Shiroe wanted to exploit the settings of Elder Tales that was in place when it was just a game.

Adventurers could loot gold from the bodies of the demi-humans they defeated. They were humanoid in appearance and possessed a basic level of intellect, so that was nothing special. But gold could be looted from feral creatures such as wild dogs and large boars as well.

There was no real explanation as to why this was so. Elder Tales was a game, it was structured to reward players with gold and items when they defeated monsters, that's why monsters dropped loot. In simple terms, this was expected of a game.

But a game would not be interesting if the game world mechanics did not make sense. Background lore was then added in order to make the mechanics logical. The setting used to explain was 'A powerful ancient relic implants gold into the spirit of the monsters when they re-spawn'.

A nonsense setting. But since it was a fact that monsters dropped loot, there must be a reason why. When Shiroe saw the fact lying before him, he decided to take advantage of it.

Naotsugu thought Shiroe has already succeeded.

"... Well then, let us meet again. In that place where 'gold appears out of nowhere and disappear to nothingness, a winding river of gold and the forgotten underground garden'."

"... But you will need many warriors. How would you make your way to the source at the deepest level? The Kunie's answer will be dependent on the result of your challenge, Master Shiroe."

Those were the final words the boss of the Kunie, Kinjo left behind.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Shiroe knew there was a huge amount of gold in the depths of an unknown region. Collecting evidence, visiting sites, undoing the seals and investigating the feasibility of raiding the place.

And he told the suspected owner of the treasure, the Kunie clan.

Shiroe was already successful theoretically when he achieved these goals. To be honest, Naotsugu felt that there was no need for Shiroe to contact the Kunie clan in the first place.

The targeted treasures were in the underground zone and they even had the means to access it. They just needed to simply go there and bring the gold home to achieve amazing wealth.

(Hmm... That's mean there is another reason why Shiroe is so depressed.)

When he thought about it, the answer was obvious.

This troublesome friend of his conversed with the Kunie even though there was no need to do so.

'... There are no schemes. We will simply have to beg for it. We have to convince him no matter what.'

That's what he said before negotiating with the Kunie.

At that point, Naotsugu thought Shiroe was being humble when declaring 'I don't have any plans'. But it turned out that he really didn't have anything in mind. What a clumsy fellow... Naotsugu thought with a smile.

In order to succeed, Shiroe would plan ahead and consider all possibilities. He seemed to have spent quite a bit of time this time too. Naotsugu took part in the scouting visit to the deepest part of Palm, but he heard from ReGan that

preparations were made a long while ago. The long nights Shiroe spent studying and researching in the study room was all for this conference.

Shiroe did so much preparatory work in order to gain all this money. And his hard work was rewarded with a promise straight from the mouth of the Kunie clan. Now they just needed to venture into this new zone and grab the money.

But Shiroe had a more ambitious goal in mind.

Shiroe wouldn't make intricate plans if he wanted to make friends with someone. He could only speak the truth just like an idiot. Shiroe did not want to rob the place by force, take the Kunie clan by surprise or lie about it. This meant he wanted to befriend the Kunie and was feeling down because he failed.

Naotsugu understood this and could only sigh, it couldn't be helped.

"Speaking of which, you were not acting like yourself back there."

"Really?"

"It's like you can't speak your mind. It won't become a festival, a festival that is not really a festival."

"Is that so."

Naotsugu wanted to trash things out with Shiroe to clear the air, but Shiroe's answer was vague and half-hearted.

"He's holding back again." Naotsugu sighed.

The negotiation today was definitely going to fail.

The Kunie clan observed a policy of extreme secrecy. And Shiroe withheld the crucial point of how the funds were going to be used. They didn't discuss or make any compromise either. Both sides were withholding too much information.

That's why the negotiations did not make any headway. Having worked in the corporate world for a year, Naotsugu understood this would not work.

Just like the purchasing he did before, just sell a kg of pepper for 2450 yen. Get the purchase order from the client and submit it to the supply department. There was no need for conversations. But suggesting new products and negotiating long term contracts were another matter. You needed to understand the situation of the other side. You needed to convey the constraints you faced on your side as well. You had to consider the issues for both parties and not simply keep pushing for your own agenda. These were the prerequisites, the rest was sincerity. In order to move forward, both sides would definitely need to compromise.

With the secretive manner Shiroe and Kinjo handled the negotiations, the talks were doomed from the beginning.

Naotsugu didn't know what cards both of them were holding in reserve.

He didn't know what Shiroe intended to do with all that money neither.

Or why Shiroe seemed so troubled.

Shiroe was being too considerate again.

"What are you thinking about Shiroe?"

"..."

"This is just the beginning, so spit out everything that is troubling you."

Troubling things, troubling things, Shiroe chanted like an incantation. He lay down with a moan.

"Hey Naotsugu."

"Yeah."

"Kinjo mentioned that we need many warriors right?"

"Ah."

Naotsugu was wondering what was troubling Shiroe and replied without thinking. The path to get the funds was clear, so the problem was how to get on the good side of the Kunie. Wasn't that the main issue? Shiroe faced the confused Naotsugu and continued.

"No matter how you interpret it, he is hinting at a raid battle. No, this is the only possibility. But this is really troubling."

"Why?"

"We lack the manpower."

"Eh?"

Naotsugu didn't get it. He knew that a fight was inevitable. If you found a mysterious zone in the depths of a dungeon, there was a high chance there would be a raid battle. But he was confident they would prevail. Adventurers were immortal, and Shiroe could tap on the manpower of the Round Table Council. It might take some time, but they would eventually make it through.

"All the guilds in the Round Table Councils are under surveillance. We are being led by the nose here, unable to get away from supervision. I don't want Minami to locate me."

Naotsugu was taken aback.

Not using the resources of the Round Table Council. Not wanting Minami to find out about this operation. And he was withholding the final objective. What kind of handicap play was this? Naotsugu's mouth stayed open. There was probably a time limit too. Since Shiroe didn't want Minami to catch wind of this, they couldn't stay too long. Naotsugu who sneaked out of Akiba in secret understood. Except for the members of Log Horizon, other people probably thought that Shiroe was holed up in the guild building hard at work. Since they wanted to complete the mission before others knew about it, there would be a time limit.

"Shiroe you masochist."

Shiroe who was lying down replied, "I'm not. I just want to live happily everyday."

Naotsugu was speechless, but Shiroe was not lying. Naotsugu knew very well.

This was Shiroe's true wish. He had been this way since the Debauchery Tea Party days. Shiroe had always been striving for the easiest method with highest chance of success. When the method seemed winding and troublesome, it meant the problem was twisted and hard.

The complex and winding path turns out to be the shortest way. That's how Shiroe's plan feels like.

Naotsugu's friend did not compromise on his target.

That was why Shiroe worked so hard and was burdened with so much.

(Although most of these troubles are created by Shiroe himself. There are many people who can assist Shiroe with his problems.)

"Well, I guess there is no other way."

Naotsugu statement contradicted his heart.

Shiroe was a man who would get it done in the end. He was not someone who would lose sight of his goal. If he were someone who would lose track of his objective, Naotsugu just needed to bash Shiroe's head in with a brick.

Shiroe seemed troubled right now, but he would accept the reality of the situation with time. Not just Shiroe, all men were like that. Naotsugu blushed when he thought about this. He recalled the incident where someone's stubbornness brought a ton of trouble to others. But Naotsugu thought that it was necessary.

It was the same for everyone, and probably applied to Shiroe too.

He might be heralded as a strategist and an intellectual, but Shiroe was actually clumsy by nature. The clumsy Shiroe required time to think things through.

And it would be great if Shiroe let Naotsugu accompany him during this period of time.

Even if Naotsugu left him alone, Shiroe would work hard in order to accept the reality of things. That's the kind of man Naotsugu's friend was. He gave everything he had in the things he did.

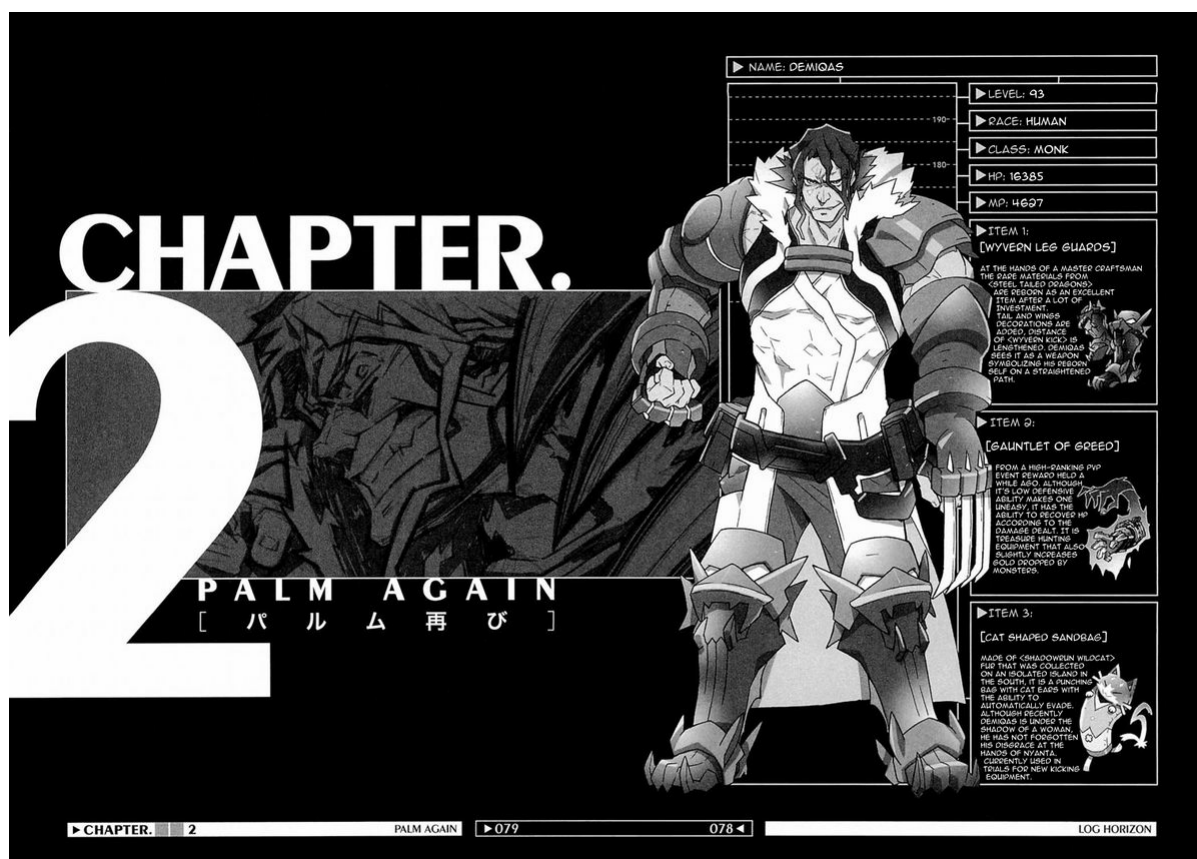
"There is no other way. Let's go solicit members for the raid. Don't worry, it will work out in the end."

When Shiroe mumbled hesitantly, Naotsugu kicked Shiroe optimistically and added "It will be fine." Everything can be repaired and mended, Naotsugu thought, but he didn't convey it verbally.

Shiroe will definitely find the sun rising over the horizon.

That was the winning condition for the Tea Party. Naotsugu decided to appreciate that scenery.

After knowing Shiroe for so long, such a night was not uncommon.



Chapter 2: Palm Again

Part 1

Going above the party limit of 6 Adventurers, a raid group allowed a large group of Adventurers to work together and challenge difficult quests in dungeons. When Elder Tales was just a game, challenging end game content was all the rage, and raiding quests were the most popular among them.

There were different types of raids, categorized by the number of participants. The largest were called Legion Raids, consisting of 96 Adventurers, but only a handful of Legion Raid quests existed in all of Yamato.

The most common raid quests on the server were Full Raids, which condensed the essence of running a raid into a well-rounded package, requiring 4 parties of 6 Adventurers each. Needing 24 Adventurers, conquering such raids was the path to fame within the server. When Elder Tales was still a game, there were weekly announcements detailing the achievements and expectations of the major guilds in raids, a well-received news in the game.

The Debauchery Tea Party which Shiroe took part in was an active group that aimed to complete Full Raids. If you included the reserves, Legion Raids required over a hundred people to challenge, so even the famous guilds seldom took part in them. That's why Full Raids were the most popular and perfect challenge in the server.

There might be some misunderstandings, but Full Raids did not require powerful equipment.

If you were a rookie in raids, and they required powerful equipment obtained through raids to complete them, then no one would be able to complete such raids. No matter how difficult the mission might be, it was still a game. If no one wanted to play the game, then there was no point for the developers to release such content.

It needed to be tough enough to challenge the players, but must not be impossible to beat. For the developers of raiding content, this required good taste and experience.

So what was the content of a good raid challenge?

When Elder Tales was just a game, the game creator who was known as the lead designer said this.

'... Content that allows you and your companions to grow.'

Shiroe felt that these words literally reflected the message the creator wanted to convey.

A raid should be challenging enough for a team of a certain level of equipment to complete with some training. The training here referred to the analysis of the raid content, scouting the characteristics of the enemies, formulating a suitable battle plan and training until you were proficient enough to achieve the mission objectives.

The strength and abilities of the players played an important role. With the right mix of people, the group would be able to complete the raid content. But sooner or later, you would run into content that you could not master. To overcome it, you would need to move as one with your teammates and work together. This went beyond the limits of the avatars' abilities and the strength of their equipment, it was the bond between comrades.

If you were determined to challenge difficult raid content, you would need people you could rely on as comrades. This level of teamwork required time to improve. If a bunch of ragtag Adventurers rushed into a difficult battle, the fragile relationships would deteriorate under pressure. If that happened, the coalition that was similar to a guild would crumble.

That's why Shiroe was so troubled.

Shiroe made a lot of close friends after the battle of Sand Leaf. Even a long time player like Shiroe increased the number of people on his friend list multiple times. Although he could contact people by telepathy, he was unable to log into the internet. The chance of success would definitely increase if he requested aid from a professional raiding guild like Black Swords Knights or West Wind Brigade. But right now, the prominent guilds might be under the surveillance of some group. No, Shiroe had already confirmed that someone was keeping tabs on them. So he was unable to tap into these guilds for aid.

The abilities of individual Adventurers weren't bad either. But since a raid was group content, they would need to have a training camp if he chose that route. Building a new team was very risky. It would be nice to deepen the relationships between the team, but he wanted to finish the mission as soon as possible. With that condition in mind, Shiroe was hesitant about creating a new team.

There wouldn't be such problems if the Debauchery Tea Party was still here, Shiroe thought. That was a bold group of people, daring to take on any raid. He remembered Turi who liked sake and rushing into battle screaming. If it were that group that grabbed any chance to gain fame no matter the hardship, if Kanami and her comrades were still here, this raid would be a piece of cake.

"I understand. No problem."

Shiroe sighed in relief when he heard this answer.

The silver haired man in front of him readily accepted Shiroe's request.

This was Susukino, one of the 5 player cities. According to modern geography, this was approximately the city of Sapporo. There was a large bar in the center of the city which doubled as the guild house of Silver Sword.

Although it was a bar, the ceiling was high so it did not feel humid. The couch felt more like a long wooden bench and 'Eyes of Mystery' William Massachusetts was sitting on it, looking at Shiroe sharply.

"I am very grateful... But don't you want the details?"

"You'll tell me even if I don't ask."

Shiroe who contacted the guild master of Silver Sword organized the things he wanted to say in his mind. William accepted the request, so that was a start. He would need to give a detailed explanation to strengthen their relationship.

During the formation of the Round Table Council, William was impatient and had a short temper. It wouldn't be wise to drag the explanation. Shiroe split up with Naotsugu in order to work separately, and he intended to bring back good news from his foray into the HQ of Silver Sword.

"The location is a new raid zone accessible from the depths of Palm. We have scouted the area, it is a Full Raid challenge. The enemies we encountered are level 89, the discovery was made by us. We have unsealed the entrance. You can assume the difficulty is very high."

"Hmm..."

After the talk with Kinjo, Shiroe's group made another trip to the deepest area of the depths of Palm to investigate the seal. Although the seal was still active, those that were permitted by ReGan would be able to enter through the door with an entry pass given by ReGan. As expected, they confirmed the interior contained a raid zone.

The ceiling of the zone was high with ancient architecture design... it gave the impression of being an extension of the depths of Palm. This underground space that was illuminated by glowing crystals was filled with shrines and had arching ceilings, an amazing facility.

From afar, they saw some jelly like monsters that had no fixed form. At level 89, Shiroe and Naotsugu should be able to take down a single one. But since this was a Full Raid challenge, this meant it had been set to be on par with 24 level 89 Adventurers. Shiroe's group retreated without engaging.

As Shiroe expected, there was a limit to the number of people that could enter. This meant only 24 Adventurers could enter the zone. For quests that placed emphasis on numbers, you could not force your way through with overwhelming numbers.

William smirked as he listened intently to Shiroe's crisp report. He garnered a lot of information from Shiroe's minimal words. This was expected of veteran Adventurers who had gotten used to raids.

"What types of enemies are there? Speculations are fine too."

"What we saw are slime monsters, about 5 meters in width. Although this is just a guess, from experience and the shape of the facility, I think they might be Titans."

"Titans."

There were all sorts of monsters in Elder Tales. They were created by the game developers who pushed the limits of their imagination. The monsters were categorized into different types. Examples were the Sahuagin and goblins Shiroe's group fought in Sand Leaf. Others included the undead type Skeletons and the famed strongest mythical beasts Dragons. One such category of monsters was the Titans. Famous in Yamato, they were found in the north of Kanto. There were different types of Titans such as Cyclops and Frost Giants. They took pride in their high health and attack power, but were low in agility and speed. Unlike the image others had of Titans, high level Titans were able to attack with powerful magic. Compared to Dire Beasts and Treants, Titans were strong enemies.

"What a coincidence, I am familiar with these, they roam around Susukino."

William said.

Shiroe nodded in reply. This was one of the reasons why Shiroe approached Silver Sword. Based on Hokkaido in the real world, the Ezzo Empire was the front line of the People of the Land's war with the Titans. Silver Sword shifted their HQ to Susukino with its many Titan centric raids after leaving Akiba. After gaining this information, Shiroe visited one of the few organizations that enjoyed success in such quests, Silver Sword.

"But there are problems."

William continued while keeping his stubborn face on.

"Silver Sword is on hiatus right now. Short of people."

"Eh?"

"I mean there are members who won't take part in this raid. There are guys who are adamant not to take part in raids anymore, or intend to stay in Susukino forever."

William gave a tough reply.

"That means I can't take the job. Although we can still take on simple quests, but definitely not a tough one like this... this is too difficult. Although we have reached level 95, it is too big a challenge. It will be a stretch to gather 20 people."

"Is it... because of the memory loss?"

Shiroe asked about the horror of losing your memory, but William shook his head.

"The loss is exaggerated. We are not afraid. And we don't fear the fight. At least not because of the monsters."

"If not, then why?"

Shiroe was confused.

Shiroe could understand if it were because of fear. You might be able to respawn no matter how many times you died, but there was still some physiological inhibition towards dying. The pain had been dulled, and the discomfort was only of muscle ache when you lost most of your health bar. Even the pain during the instance of death was still bearable. But to see a steel sword pierce through your chest was enough to shatter the will of some Adventurers. Being shredded by the claws of a dire beast and seeing the scenes of disembowelment that were not censored. The horror of death remained.

Even famous guilds like D.D.D. and the Black Sword Knights were hesitant to challenge the hardest raids after the Catastrophe. And the difficulty of battle had increased after the Catastrophe. Team positioning was even harder without the overhead view of the battlefield. The level of monsters they could take on had dropped compared to the past when Elder Tales was just a game, a fact noted by most Adventurers. The major guilds had dropped their choice of raid difficulty correspondingly.

(Because of the fear of death, the drop in raiding membership is understandable. But...)

"Why?"

"Shiroe... Erm, Mr Shiroe."

"Just Shiroe is fine."

"Oh. How many times have you died so far, Shiroe?"

He was probably referring to the period after the Catastrophe, so Shiroe replied "None." William's dour face twisted with displeasure after hearing this response.

Instead of displeasure, his expression was closer to hesitation.

"I can't explain clearly to someone with no experience."

"..."

"Just die and you will understand. The incompetence, the bad side and the ugliness of yourself. Die a hundred times and you will understand a hundred times. They can't go on because it is too hard to face them."

William looked very young when he bit his lips.

Shiroe saw a young guild master who was disappointed in losing a place for him to prove himself. Although something Shiroe should understand was right there, the time for Shiroe to think about it was up.

With an explosive sound, a familiar man approached Shiroe with a menacing expression.

Part 2

On the other hand, Naotsugu and ReGan were wandering around Susukino.

It was December. Susukino in the depths of winter was covered in silvery white. Two men were walking along the wide streets of Susukino. There were plenty of restaurants in the direction they were heading. They were going the other way from Shiroe, hoping to find members for their raid.

In Elder Tales, information like name, class and level could be seen easily. Shiroe and Naotsugu felt that the lowest level limit for this adventure was 90. Other information like guild, equipment, attitude and the way they spoke all played a part in their search. Shiroe said that gathering individuals for the raid is hard, but the members of the Tea Party were individuals anyway. Naotsugu thought that the most important thing was their instinctive feel, so he split up with Shiroe and wandered around.

"Looking for members?"

"Yeah."

Naotsugu answered the hunchback scholar walking beside him.

"I don't think we can gather 20 in an instant, but I was hoping for at least one for a start."

"Is it that easy to gather warriors for raids?"

"When things go smoothly, it is."

Naotsugu answered halfheartedly as he surveyed the streets. Compared to his first visit, the place was much more peaceful. The Susukino where Adventurers looked at each other with suspicion was no more.

Silver Sword had improved this place dramatically. That's the news he heard from Shiroe. This guild which left Akiba in search of raid quests came to this city in the north and was very influential. Silver Sword brought salvation to the violent anarchy of Susukino. Although it was not part of the Round Table Council, it was still a strong guild that was chosen as one of the twelve founding guilds. The members were different from the haughty people who ruled Susukino city. Even if their levels were the same at 90, Silver Sword was a guild that was trained through the fires of raiding.

A single top tier battle guild managed to improve the situation in Susukino, that's what Naotsugu heard from Shiroe.

A People of the Land elderly woman wearing a fur coat and a round Russian hat was walking slowly with a large bag in her hands and traveling with a child. She was probably carrying food inside. She has a peaceful expression and the kids was seems happy, meaning the state of the city was not too bad. She was rushing because it was too cold outside.

From the look of this street, the snow had been shoveled to the side, piling up 15cm high. It was still freezing outside, but it matched the scenery well, Naotsugu thought the place looked great. Shiny icicles formed under the roof of buildings, the city looked like a work of art decorated by crystals.

Passing through the residential area of the People of the Land, the roads widened. The artery that linked to the heart of Susukino. Although the abandoned buildings still looked like a frozen fortress to Naotsugu, he was used to this view compared to his trip down in May. This was the structure of this country of snow, serving the dual purpose of intimidation and practical insulation from the cold.

"Have you been to Susukino before, old man?"

"A few times."

"You will have to hold down the fort without us though."

"I was prepared for that. It would be troublesome to escort me while exploring the secrets of the depths."

ReGan replied with a hint of regret.

In a raid zone, the strength of the monsters required 5 to 6 Adventurers to defeat. With Naotsugu and Shiroe being above the requisite level, it was possible to fight with ReGan in tow to explore the depths of Palm. But for a raid that

required 24 Adventurers, the fight would be very intensive. After discussing with ReGan, it would be best for him to stay in Susukino while they went for the raid.

"It is a pity."

"Of course. We are talking about the secrets of the Kunie. The truth we can uncover there is worth more than gold."

"We will bring back whatever information we can."

Naotsugu promised ReGan.

"No, please don't mind me. This is the duty of the Sage of Mirror Lake. There are lots of mysterious items in this city as well, a place the Adventurers are developing. While Sir Naotsugu is adventuring, I will research in Susukino in my own way. Just the thought of experiencing new things in the north makes me excited."

ReGan giggled and looked around the streets as he said this.

What a strong sense of curiosity. Although ReGan used honorifics when speaking, Naotsugu saw him as a man of the same generation. Naotsugu thought that ReGan looked like a graduate student from a science department who lived in the lab. The outgoing Naotsugu saw him as an interesting fellow he could talk to without reservation. And ReGan had hit it off with Shiroe as well.

"Well, you are right. There are lots of sights to see in Susukino too."

"Correct. I will use this chance to investigate the intercity transport gate."

"Mmmf!"

A sound interrupted their conversation.

They looked over on reflex, the top half of a person was buried in a snow pile by the road. That was an impressive way to fall. The person dived at an angle into the snow, so Naotsugu couldn't see the face. But the well-proportioned butt in hot pants stuck out nicely.

"Nice Panties!"

Naotsugu gave a thumbs up with a bright smile.

The outline of the behind flowed smoothly to the thigh.

"No arguments there."

ReGan said with a smile. (Ahh, this guy is a bro,) Naotsugu thought. Although he was a similar intellectual type like Shiroe, expressing his compliments without hesitation in this situation was much manlier.

ReGan continued levelheadedly.

"I am not familiar with the customs of the Adventurers, isn't this a low cut hot pants? So it would be wrong to call them panties."

"It's alright. Isn't it sad to exclude them? If you have panties in your heart, then those are panties."

"Well said."

"A little help here?"

The person exploded out of the snow pile in protest. Her head was probably buried very deep, she probably fell from the roof. She didn't seem to be hurt, just a slight redness on the tip of her nose. The strong body of Adventurers played a part here too.

"My bad."

"I forgot what to do when I saw that great ass."

Facing the unrepentant attitude of these two, the girl with small stature growled.

"It will be a loss for all men if my pretty face were to get hurt."

Naotsugu observed the self-declared victim who was about the height of his chest.

What a pretty and cute figure. A slender body, loose white blouse, hot pants that accentuated her long snow white thighs. The space between her pants and knee high socks shone brightly, an area called the 'absolute territory'. The top half of her costume looked like a uniform with her tie, but the bottom half was excessively exposed.

Even for men who were not looking to date, it was a fashion sense that made your heartbeat accelerate. Naotsugu's face was already burning hot. He was holding back on ceremony, but that cute face wearing a small silk hat which suited the tastes of man betrayed the atmosphere.

This was a sense of fulfillment and happiness Naotsugu had never seen before. An arrogant face declaring to the world how cute she was. Total confidence in the words she says.

Cute.

She was definitely cute.

Naotsugu didn't want to admit it, but it would be a lie to say she wasn't cute.

But saying "It will be a loss for all men" was a bit too much for Naotsugu's taste. Even so, he was still hesitant about retorting at a girl smiling at him with pudding like lips.

"Isn't it too arrogant to say something like that?"

ReGan retorted without inhibition.

(ReGan's stock is rising.)

Naotsugu was impressed.

"Hmmp... Meanie."

"Ah, she stood up."

ReGan was just teasing the girl who was recovering from her fall. She had a cheerful expression, but her face was red from ReGan's retort.

But she was still wearing a happy and proud expression. She was missing a sense of humbleness present in pretty girls. But this might be her unique way of expressing herself. The girl with a wonderful expression gave off a charismatic air about her.

"Hmmm... She is very cute but her expression is too arrogant, so even though she is cute I don't want to acknowledge it... By adding all the elements and judging the overall score, by volume and panties it is Ms. Marie's victory! In summary, a festival!"

"Huh?"

Naotsugu blurted this out unintentionally as he crossed his arms over his chest. Fortunately, the girl and ReGan didn't understand what he was saying. Naotsugu looked into the distance and waved his hands, pretending nothing happened. Naotsugu then pulled a towel out from his magic bag and tossed it to the girl.

She was dressed casually and didn't seem to be carrying a magic bag.

"Oh, I understand. I am kind to my fans."

The girl caught the towel and wiped away the snow without hesitation. She used her thumb to brush away the snow on her hat clumsily. Naotsugu took the chance to check the girl's status screen.

"Tetora."

"Call me Tetora-chan!"

Naotsugu was stunned by the forthcoming girl. Level 92, just like Naotsugu. An Adventurer who continued to battle after the Catastrophe. She belonged to the guild Light Indigo, her class was Cleric.

"Well, seems like it's easier to get close to this guy here."

"It is ineffective when you say it out loud."

As Naotsugu was retorting, Tetora leapt agilely like a cat and hugged Naotsugu's left arm, hanging with her feet off the ground.

"Really? No effect? None? Even my hugs~?"

The confident face that recognized this to be the basics asked him. The answer was no effect! Although it was easy to deny, this was the pitifulness of men. Even if you knew that she was only toying with you, you wouldn't feel irritated when a pretty girl hugged you. Tetora had an orange like fragrance.

"Re, re, release me."

"Haha. That won't do Mr Naotsugu."

His status screen was read before he realized it. In this world, it was not strange for people who met for the first time to know each other's names.

"I like to grind against men who are panicky. By the way, I hate people grinding me, so don't mix that up!"

"Like I said, let go!"

Tetora swung onto Naotsugu's back, grabbing his head and climbing onto his shoulder. With the Adventurers' strong body, he didn't really feel that she was heavy.

Tetora who was giggling as she hugged Naotsugu's head was certainly a cute girl.

With the system character design, it was not surprising to see handsome men and beautiful women all around. But that was on the outside, the atmosphere around a person could not be faked. Tetora gave off an elegant and sunny air, Naotsugu thought she was way ahead of other Adventurers in grabbing attention.

"Just like a pika rabbit climbing a tree."

"The skeleton uncle over there is so mean!"

"She called me a skeleton..."

ReGan and Tetora seemed to be having a fun conversation.

"That was an emergency, so you should have helped me right? A poor girl like me bruising my nose will make my fans cry. Really, a disgraceful fall like that could have ended my career as an idol."

"Upside down with your panties sticking out..."

"Not panties! Hot pants!"

ReGan was not backing down. He realized that Tetora was concerned with her awkward appearance earlier and was attacking her.

"Hot... warm panties... ah... Did you leak because of the fright?"

"Leak, leaking is impossible!"

"Really?"

"This snowy country really chills your stomach..."

"That's right."

"What are you saying you blind old skeleton!"

Tetora was hugging Naotsugu's whole head as she bickered with ReGan. Naotsugu lifted his hands up and grabbed Tetora by the armpit and put her gently onto the ground. He felt ReGan's gaze on him.

He understood the meaning of this gaze immediately. ReGan was asking whether Naotsugu wanted to invite this girl.

Naotsugu observed Tetora with a raid in mind.

Clerics were front line healing characters. Equipped with heavy armor, they occupied the heavy responsibility of healing the main tank. That's why out of the 3 types of healers, Clerics were the only ones that could equip heavy armor.

In fact, out of the 12 classes, together with Guardians like Naotsugu and Samurai like Soujirou, Clerics were one of the 3 classes that could equip heavy armor. With their ability to equip shields, their defense was second only to Guardians.

Clerics were dependent on equipment, responsible for holding up the health of the defense line. The defense line had to withstand the brunt of the enemies' attack. They were not limited to the blows from swords or axes, but also area attacks such as dragon's breath.

Although the attacks were directed at the defense line, the Clerics would also suffer damage if they were in range. Clerics could use powerful healing spells in close range, but the front line was still a scary place. The Clerics who faced the risks fearlessly were also known in Elder Tales as the toughest defense.

Observing Tetora again, she was armored lightly.

Tetora might be wearing casual wear for traveling in the city, so he couldn't judge from this alone. If Shiroe were here, he might be able to tell whether the girl was wearing the best set up of equipment for her build, but these were all meaningless gimmicks to Naotsugu. Naotsugu was inconclusive about that. Her level was excellent, but Naotsugu was scouting for an excellent healer that could fight in raids.

But on a separate note, Naotsugu was hesitant about pushing a girl onto a dangerous battlefield.

"A beauty like me will spread pheromones wherever I go."

Tetora said with a 'can't be helped' expression.

She was misunderstanding why Naotsugu was looking at her from head to toe. Although Naotsugu was troubled by this, Tetora seemed to be enjoying herself as she stood with her hands on her hips. 'Pheromones pheromones, it can't be helped nya, I know what you are thinking nya fufufufu...' She was so happy that she was almost singing out loud. Naotsugu didn't know what she was so happy about, trying to hug Naotsugu whenever she had the chance. Naotsugu did his best to dodge.

"I think the smell coming from your ass is not pheromones, but fart."

ReGan put his finger on his chin and commented, stopping Tetora's arrogant attitude.

"What did you say?"

"Right?"

Her face turned woeful, her knees slackened and then straightened in defiance.

"Idols don't fart!"

"What about pee?"

"We don't!"

Naotsugu's retort on reflex made Tetora fall into a trap. What a perfect combo.

"Well done you pass."

"Huh?"

"You pass... Ermm, this is kinda abrupt."

As ReGan said, it fell on instinct in the end.

Naotsugu felt a nostalgic air from Tetora. That was the feeling of his friends who pressed forward even though they were not concerned with victory.

That's how Naotsugu managed to solicit a new raid member.

Part 3

"You have guts to show your face here, Log Horizon's Shiroe."

Shiroe turned around and saw the wrathful Demiqa's draw near.

He left a trail of overturned table with food and dishes falling onto the floor. The members of Silver Sword looked uneasy at the sight of Demiqa's, as they watched the table where their leader William was seated with the guest Shiroe.

This zone was situated within Susukino city, which was obviously a no-combat zone.

That's why no one drew their weapons. One of the Adventurers told a stunned People of the Land "Don't stay here, take a break inside."

Shiroe's expression softened when he heard this. This guild was not bad at all.

But the agitated Demiqa's didn't care.

"Your easy going attitude is still the same."

"Long time no see, Mr Democracy."

This muscle bound giant looked no different after half a year. Although his equipment had been updated, his thick arms and bloodshot eyes were still the same. This was indeed the world of Elder Tales, appearances didn't change with time. For Shiroe, this was both amazing and disappointing at the same time.

He knew the possibility of this happening. When they were planning the trip to Susukino, the first concern of Naotsugu was meeting Demiqa's and his guild Brigandia again.

Shiroe clashed with Brigandia in Susukino when he rescued Serara after the Catastrophe. Because Brigandia was using violence to control the city, Marie was worried about Serara's wellbeing, leading to the operation to rescue Serara. In this world where there was no permanent death, Shiroe's victory probably didn't have that much of an effect. But they succeeded in taking Serara with them and wounding Brigandia's pride.

"Let's take this outside Shiroe!"

Demiqa's iron fist smashed onto the table.

Naotsugu was right. It was hard for him to be wrong though, since it was unrealistic for Demiqa's to forget what happened 6 months ago and let it go with the wind.

"What do you want to do outside?"

Shiroe knows what's coming, but he asked anyway.

Although he knew what Demiqa's wanted, Shiroe couldn't skip the necessary steps. Going back and forth with taunts and bickering. This was the karma Shiroe wrought, there was no escaping this. But he was soliciting for raid members right now, so Shiroe had to avoid showing his weak side to William.

"Do you prefer hamburgers or chicken cutlet?"

"Tofu."

"Tender and soft, just the way I like it. I will tenderize you until you are half dead, so get out there!"

"Shut up Demi."

William cut him off curtly.

"This man is my guest."

"Like I give a shit! William, this is my..."



"You lost right?"

"Eh!"

"You lost. Just walk away."

"But..."

"I will kick your ass again, Demiqas."

William warned Demiqas in an icy tone.

Shiroe adjusted his glasses and thought. He understood the situation in Susukino from the information he gathered. Half a year ago, chaos continued to reign after Shiroe left Susukino. After forming the Round Table Council, several expeditions were sent to Susukino to evacuate anyone who wanted to leave. After Silver Sword migrated to the north, there was still bloodlust in the air, but it was relatively stable for a player city in the border areas.

In this city ruled by several battle guilds, a high ranking guild within the server like Silver Sword brought stability to the region. William's gang was ranked 3rd behind Black Sword Knights and D.D.D. Although they did not actively patrol the streets, they did not tolerate Adventurers that disturbed the peace. From their perspective, Adventurers who bullied the powerless People of the Land were despicable weaklings. They would not allow such people to throw their weight around in Elder Tales.

An example of such reports was right before Shiroe's eyes.

There were 6 ears sticking out from behind the kitchen counter. The werecat People of the Land revealing just their eyes were observing the situation. They seemed to think this was troublesome, but there was no fear in their eyes.

Silver Sword earned the trust of the People of the Land in Susukino. When Elder Tales was just a game, Susukino was set to be the frontline city in the fight against Titans, a pioneer city built from the wilderness. This setting might have positive implications too.

Instead of Brigandia which ruled the city with an iron fist, Silver Sword playing the role of the guardians of the city with no ulterior intentions was a much better upgrade.

Demiqa's grind his teeth at William's threat and glared at Shiroe.

"You can't beat Shiroe anyway."

"I have upgraded my gear though difficult raids!"

On closer inspection, Demiqas' Wyvern Shin Guard seemed to have been modified heavily. From the equipment he was using, it was clear that Demiqas took part in many raids in these 6 months. And they were not easy quests. The Beast King's Coat was a loot from the level 90 raid quest 'Ruler of the Tenvuikutori Plains', an admirable achievement.

"Thinking that you can win because of your gear is the reason you will lose."

"!!"

William maintained a casual attitude while facing the silent anger of Demiqas. Shiroe didn't know what kind of relationship these two had, but he got the general gist. They probably had a duel which William won overwhelmingly, forcing Demiqas to play second fiddle.

"Like I said, Brigandia has lost half its members. Mah, it can't be helped. They were defeated by a werecat swordsman who is not even in a guild. It's obvious that no one would want to stay. And the poopy Londark was headhunted by people from Kansai."

"Hey, idol wannabe. Is it okay for you to say poop?"

"Don't say poop, your popularity will plummet."

"Hah! I, I didn't say that okay? Idols don't say things like poop. That would tarnish my image."

"So you are going for the comedy route."

"I am a traditional beauty galaxy idol. Even the Voyager will rush into space without wearing shoes for me!"

"Just like a grade schooler. So what about Demiqas?"

"I am not a grade schooler! Demiqas is like the little brother of Silver Sword, or rather the whole guild is falling into that role. Anyway, peace came to Susukino. Really, I am not a grade schooler okay? We have Demidemi's wife to thank for that. Before I forget, I am not a grade schooler from this point onwards alright."

The loud obnoxious voice traveled to the tense table where Shiroe, William and Demiqas were. They seemed to be heading this way as the sound was getting louder. They were talking without sparing a thought for others.

"Really!? Wife!? What the hell!!!"

"Marriage huh. How wonderful."

"Although he still denies the marriage stubbornly, my sources from the People of the Land network tell me he cleans the sheets daily and provides 3 meals a day. It makes the other guild members jealous, saying that his aristocratic People of the Land bride has Demidemi under her thumb."

"Eh..."

"The People of the Land he kidnapped to be a servant is being treated so delicately. Like the opening to a hentai game. Ah, Mr Naotsugu. Want to serve me? Hehehe. It can be arranged, I am an idol after all."

"Enough, get down you fake idol!"

Shiroe heard the cute voice giggling while uttering uncute contents.

There were 2 male voices accompanying this approaching trouble, and they sounded so familiar.

"That's why in this period of time, Demidemi has become a more rounded person, just like a ball. Ah, it's Demidemi."

Demiqas flew through the air instantly without any running start. Wyvern Kick. Gliding 5 meters through the air with a powerful kick, the renowned attack skill of Monks. He probably did it with his body movement instead of using the game menu as it seemed faster compared to half a year ago.

The attack with no preparatory movement was blocked by Naotsugu who grabbed his shield in an instant. The clear clashing sound showed that Demiqas was attacking seriously. If it were a real fight, the Guards operated by the Kunie should be rushing into this no-combat zone. Naotsugu didn't really want to fight. He was just taking the blow with the shield on his shoulder to avoid sounding off the alarm.

But the attack still reached the target. The slender girl hanging off Naotsugu's neck was being squashed by the pressure. Her mouth was open wide, hugging on to Naotsugu like a koala bear.

The ones at the doorway were Naotsugu, ReGan and a Cleric. Naotsugu knew that there was a high chance Demiqas would attack Shiroe, so he came here to meet up with Shiroe. Unfortunately, they were just gossiping about Demiqas when they showed up.

Although they meant no harm, Demiqas was still angered by their talk. Well, Shiroe didn't blame him. Discussing such things in public and in such a tense situation, no wonder Demiqas was angry. The kick was a bit too much, but it was no problem for Naotsugu. Naotsugu had gotten used to Akatsuki's kicks. The leading expert in being kneed and kicked in Akiba was definitely Naotsugu the Guardian. With his 50% success rate when defending against Akatsuki, Naotsugu matched up well with Monks who specialized in kicking.

"A flying kick?"

"Where are you putting your hands at a time like this? Don't put your weight on me!"

"Damn you Tetora, running your mouth off!"

Their conversation was going nowhere as the scene descended into chaos.

Seemed like the Cleric hanging on to Naotsugu's neck was Tetora. A rather cute name. Shiroe understood when he read her level and guild. Naotsugu was probably recruiting members. With a couple more people, together with

himself and Naotsugu, they should barely be able to form a Full Raid. As Shiroe breathed a sigh of relief, William laughed and announced.

"Great, with the healer and Demiqas, we will have the numbers. You have so much energy, save that kick for the actual raid, Haha."

Shiroe's sense of relief disappeared when he heard the mocking laughter.

The raid beyond the depths of Palm. Shiroe felt all sorts of worries piling up no matter where he went.

Part 4

The preparations proceeded smoothly.

Adventurers kept most of their belongings in their rooms, their guild house, the bank, in a warehouse or brought it along in their bags. Veteran Adventurers owned several weight reduction containers, known as magic bags. Bringing along perishables and equipment needed for adventuring was common knowledge.

It was even more so for big battle guilds specializing in raids like Silver Sword. The elite members spent every day battling. They were ready before evening after William gave the word.

The world of Elder Tales after the Catastrophe moved twelve times slower than before. With the Fairy Rings rendered useless, the amount of time required to traverse great distances was depressingly long. You had to go through the straits of Lightport in order to reach the depths of Palm. Although Shiroe, Naotsugu and ReGan flew past the straits on Griffons, it was not feasible for a group of 24 to travel that way.

Silver Sword was one of the major guilds competing for the honor of being the best in raids, so quite a number of them have flying mounts, but not all. Although they could make it by air if they squeezed, William decided to travel directly by land. Shiroe agreed with this means of travel.

Silver Sword was William's guild, so he was most suited for command.

Shiroe and Naotsugu understood this and had no qualms in following William's lead. The ones complaining were Demiqas and Tetora. Demiqas threw a tantrum without a word because of his pride, while Tetora disturbed Naotsugu in a Tetora way, saying stuff like 'I want to be a flying idol.'

Shiroe felt that there was more than meets the eye.

For Naotsugu, spring had come.

There was only one way if they traveled by land. That was through the tunnel under the straits of Lightport. As expected, this tunnel also doubled as a dungeon in the world of Elder Tales, but was no threat to the Full Raid group with an average level of 93. This dungeon could be traversed alone for Adventurers above level 40 anyway.

The raid group led by William advanced into the dungeon underneath the straits.

The basics of group battle in Elder Tales was the party made of 6. The 24 men Full Raid was comprised of four parties, each party of six was then numbered from 1st to 4th.

Raid battles differed widely, so there was no such thing as the correct composition. But it was common to see the 1st party focus on defense and the 2nd party be well balanced for guerrilla missions. The 3rd and 4th parties concentrated on attack and were responsible for bringing down the enemy.

The first problem in planning a raid was assigning members to parties.

If you thought about the roles each member played, it would be based on their job class. For example, the tanks in the 1st party formed the defense line for the whole raid, as it was impossible for all the players to withstand the attacks of the raid boss indefinitely. The main tank would need to have the highest defense and health bar, and use the best taunting skills to focus the enemies' hate on himself. Only a Guardian met all these criteria. Although Samurai were a viable choice, Guardians were still better with their ability to equip shields.

But that was only in normal situations.

If the Samurai was of a higher level than the Guardian or had better equipment, the Samurai would be the better choice. And more important than the level and equipment was the character of the Adventurer. In raid battles, spending long periods of time tanking the enemies' attacks was a heavy burden. Skills were important, but mental toughness and the teamwork with others were crucial as well. There were some Guardians out there who preferred to concentrate on attacks and hated taunting enemies and protecting teammates. Instead of assigning them to the front lines, they would be more suited for command or the 3rd or 4th party which concentrated on attacking.

This meant that detailing the members was not limited to classes and levels, but also the character of the players, a complicated puzzle to derive the best combination. Taking into account the weaknesses and movements of the enemy monsters, there were plenty of permutations to consider, a difficult question that had plagued commanders for the past 20 years.

Shiroe understood that the reason why William chose to travel by land lay here. He wanted to understand the nature and strength of the new members as reference for the team roster when the time came.

(But, I don't think you can use this as reference.)

Shiroe was assigned as the leader of the 2nd party.

The members were Enchanter Shiroe.

Guardian Naotsugu.

Cleric Tetora.

Druid Vuorinen.

Swashbuckler Federico.

Monk Demiqas.

Vuorinen and Federico were veterans of Silver Sword, and they welcomed Shiroe more warmly than he expected.

The problem choice was Demiqas, rushing out when the battle started to hunt down monsters. The monsters were between level 30 and 40. For the level 93 Demiqas, this was as challenging as poking through paper windows. It was hard to tell his character and teamwork from this.

Although Shiroe tried talking to him several times, Demiqas cut the conversation short with his curt and menacing replies.

"No need to rush."

The kind and warm Vuorinen told him.

"It will be great if we complete this by year's end."

There was a reason why Vuorinen thought this way.

Things like raid battles were not challenges you could complete in a day. From their experience of Elder Tales as a game, a raid zone had countless normal monsters and 5 to 10 raid bosses. They could be wiped out by a normal monster if they were careless. You would need to be wiped out dozens of times in order to understand the raid boss' capabilities and look for the way to victory, that's what raiding was all about.

If you died in a raid zone, you would not be sent to the cathedral in the player's city. You would respawn right at the entrance of the zone. This meant the entrance to the zone had the same capability as a cathedral.

Since they could challenge the zone from the entrance if they were wiped out, it was the norm for players to try again multiple times. Preparing to spend a month on this was reasonable.

William's instruction to purchase a month's worth of perishables reinforced Vuorinen's words. Shiroe was already prepared for this and squeezed all sorts of materials and tools into his bags, enough to last him 2 months.

This was great for evading spies, Shiroe thought. Although Susukino was a border city with sparse population, it was still a player city. There was a high chance people were already watching him. It would be safe to stay in an unexplored region. Shiroe didn't know how true this was...

But even so, he didn't want this to drag too long.

Even if he stayed still, the chance of information leaking increased the longer he took. And if Shiroe was right, this was not a surveillance he could evade by switching zones. Although Nyanta and Akatsuki were creating an alibi for him in Akiba, there was no telling how long he could keep this up. So he wanted to wrap this up as soon as possible.

As Shiroe thought about this, he started missing his old friends.

How strange, Shiroe thought as he scratched his cheek.

It had been less than half a year, but he missed the guild house wrapped by an ancient tree. The fragrant wooden floors of the living room made by Mitchitaka, he missed the cheerful sound of everyone. He wanted to watch the sun rise from the balcony while drinking tea. In order to protect all this, he had to complete this mission. I am a guild master now, Shiroe pushed himself on with this thought.

"Wahh!"

Shiroe looked towards the source of the scream, Tetora was staring at him.

"What happened?"

"Mr Shiroe was smiling! I saw him smiling by himself!"

"He does smile every now and then."

"Really!? This was my first time seeing it..."

Barging in with this rude conversation were the duo Naotsugu and Tetora.

"Keep a distance from Shiroe. He is a closet pervert."

"Ahh. I see... Mr Shiroe is so pitiful. Want to see some panties?"

"You claim to be an idol and yet you are fine showing it to anyone?"

"I'm not showing. I'm just asking. Just curious. If I really wanted to show it, I will pretend it's an accident. And then report that guy to the police."

"That's being a trap, not an idol."

"Mr Naotsugu you meanie. Even if you are charmed by me, I still don't belong to any one person."

Although Shiroe didn't show it on his face, he was shocked by their unhesitant conversations. Naotsugu grunted 'I'm not charmed.' Tetora used Tetora's way and hugged Naotsugu, saying 'The words of a true tsundere. I'm climbing up okay?'

They had good affinity with each other.

Shiroe forgot to be mad at being the subject of a rude discussion, but felt happy for some reason. This was just their second meeting. It was only natural that she had never seen Shiroe smile, and both of them knew nothing of each other.

Tetora somehow angered Naotsugu and fled, with Naotsugu chasing behind. Shiroe didn't feel the need to stop them. They could take on any monsters in this dungeon easily, and Demiqas was wiping out all the enemies nearby anyway.

Shiroe still waved and shouted 'Be careful okay' anyway. A hand patted his back and said to him 'You are really taking it easy.'

William was fully equipped with a giant bow on his back. He looked straight ahead with his sharp expression and walked to Shiroe's side.

"Instead of taking it easy, I feel that I am enjoying myself."

Shiroe replied.

William seemed to laugh bitterly upon hearing this response.

Shiroe only learned in these few days that William's sharp and guarded expression was his default face, he was not actually unhappy about anything. He did not show his thoughts through his face and his mocking smile didn't really mean anything. This was the norm for William.

A good commander needed to grasp the direction and character of his members. This would maximize the effectiveness of command and execution.

On the other hand, the members would also learn the perks of the commander over time. Just following orders blindly was meaningless. Only when you understood the intent and purpose would you be able to react in time to achieve the team's goal.

Appointed as the leader of the 2nd party, Shiroe tried spending more time understanding William. From the unhappy expression William wore all the time, Shiroe could imagine the guild issues William worried about all the time.

But this was to be expected. Without this level of ability, it would be impossible to lead a guild like Silver Sword to the top of the battle guild rankings.

"But he's not."

The meaning behind these vague words could be understood by following William's gaze and looking at the bulky figure destroying monsters. Indeed, Demiqa was straying away from the 2nd party's formation.

"He is an unstable factor."

Shiroe said apologetically with a hint of guilt. But William simply smiled and nodded. William used his left hand to stroke his chin and looked into the distance with a bitter smile.

"But he also needs this chance. Whether he will fight on or give up, we will know when the raid begins. Demi understands too. If he doesn't, then this will be his limit."

William seemed to be hinting at all sorts of things with cryptic words, but Shiroe didn't understand it at this point in time.

Part 5

Three weeks later, the group was still raiding on.

The 1 month target they set was shattered easily, the way ahead seemed to be getting more unpredictable. They only took down 2 raid bosses after 3 weeks, and only had a vague idea of the whole raid zone.

The atmosphere of the group was growing increasingly fatigued and serious.

"Damn it!!"

The roaring Demiqa was taking damage from poison, Vuorinen cursed in his mind as he cast Heartbeat Healing on him. Demiqa would constantly be healed gradually over a 20 second period. Green and orange pulsing light effects surrounded the burly warrior.

Demiqa used his specialty of dashing while punching to charge at the yellow slime creature.

Lightning Fist. He leaned forward and struck with all his might, piercing the slime monster easily. But Vuorinen sighed, knowing it wouldn't work.

The Orcus Jelly splattered slime in all directions. A pungent smell from the pieces filled the air as they started to dissolve. The attacking Demiqa was also covered in white smoke and was smoldering. Orcus Jelly used its acidic body to attack enemies and would also damage anybody who came into contact with it. The 5 meter large slime ball didn't seem to be hurt.

"I told you so!"

Vuorinen rushed in Demiqa's direction. The muscle head warrior's strike had put him out of the 20 meter range of healing spells. Although he cast Heartbeat Healing on him, the recovery amount wouldn't be enough. If Vuorinen didn't cast Instant Cures and Minor Heals, Demiqa would fall again.

Vuorinen felt frustrated with Demiqas who had disrupted the formation again.

The dull thud from the sewage pipe on either side of them signaled the arrival of more Orcus Jellies.

A chaotic fight.

The raiding group of 24 was led by Vuorinen's guild master William, made up of 4 parties. But only the 1st and 2nd parties had acceptable levels of defense. The 1st party specialized in defense and was tanking the bulk of the Orcus Jellies from the front.

The 3rd and 4th parties were in charge of dishing out firepower to destroy the enemy. Their offense was heightened to kill their foes, but their defense was lacking. They were to dispose of the monsters the 1st party was pulling.

The 2nd party Vuorinen was assigned to have the task of guerrilla missions.

They had to intercept the monsters that got past the 1st party. When the enemies launched surprise attacks against the weakly armored 3rd or 4th party, the 2nd party would need to protect them.

The 1st party was in the spotlight as they held off the biggest enemies and attracted their hate, the 2nd party on the other hand needed quick reactions to danger and was very important from a tactical standpoint. All of the members needed to know what the task at hand was in order to coordinate efficiently.

The monsters emerging from the sides launched their attack.

The 1st party was holding the defense line ahead and couldn't pull back. Demiqas pulled a surprise attack when the raid bogged down to a stalemate. This was a dangerous time for enemy reinforcements to come in. They were coming at the flanks of the 3rd and 4th parties, the rear of the formation with weak defense. The lightly armored mages responsible for long range attacks were especially vulnerable. It would be over if they were to fall.

(This is not the time to worry about others!)

Vuorinen chased after Demiqas who had charged on ahead.

He watched his steps and moved ahead, failing to notice the translucent yellow pudding wall approaching until it was too late.

(This is bad,) Vuorinen thought as silvery mass manifested from his right.

"Anchor Howl!"

The ear splitting shout of the Guardian attracted the wrath of the Orcus Jelly. It was his teammate Naotsugu from the 2nd party. Vuorinen heard that Naotsugu was from a small but famous guild, and was impressed with his smooth movements in the raid battle.

The monster shook its ugly body, probably locking on to Naotsugu. Naotsugu raised his shield in defense, understanding that reckless strikes would invite counter attacks in the form of acid. He skillfully used his taunts and wielded his shield to minimize the damage. His ability might be even better than that of the Guardian Dinkuron, the defensive specialist of Silver Sword.

The Orcus Jelly from the left moved in to double team Naotsugu, rising up like bread dough and suddenly freezing.

Without even hearing it, Vuorinen could tell this was the timely Astral Hypnos spell cast by their Enchanter. Although it was only for 20 seconds, monsters hit by the spell would cease all movement. Because they were just sleeping, just a light hit was enough to display the condition. But the ability to reduce the number of active enemies was already a big help. Since this was a raid zone, the monsters here were all buffed up to raid zone level. The effectiveness of hypnosis spells was reduced to about 4 seconds. Just 4 seconds was enough to slip past the enemy and head for the front lines.

"Enemy reinforcement, requesting support! 8 o' clock, Orcus Jelly!!"

Shiroe shouted as he cast Astral Hypnos.

In response to the voice, the 3rd and 4th parties switched their attack target. The first blow came from the commander William. His crystal like arrows sparkled like meteors, piercing holes through the stomach of the Orcus

Jelly the size of fists. This was followed by fire, frost and lightning spells raining down in rapid succession.

All raid monsters had huge amounts of health. Even the combined attack of dozens could not take them down in a short period of time. The Orcus Jelly crippled by Shiroe had broken free, but the 4 seconds was enough for their Guardian to accumulate enough hate.

Vuorinen watched the nimble Cleric bounce around the battlefield.

The lightly armored Cleric was more experienced than she looked. She came from an unknown guild called Light Indigo, but was no stranger to raid battles. Her lightly armored build contradicted directly with the orthodox build of a fully armored Cleric. But from her skillful positioning and movements, Vuorinen knew that she had a good sense and understanding of the situation.

Tetora moved back and forth repeatedly as she distributed her Reactive Heal among teammates. She hid behind Naotsugu when the Orcus Jelly compressed its body. Using the powerful defense of the Guardian to block the dangerous area attacks of the raid monsters, a move veterans used.

"Doing okay, Mr Naotsugu?"

"The slime festival is really swell!"

"Wonderful...! Mr Naotsugu is so cool...!"

"You are totally using me as a shield!"

"I healed you several times already, so take some hits for me alright?"

Vuorinen smiled when he saw the two of them bicker. Shiroe and the duo he brought along were impressively tenacious. Vuorinen was impressed.

Mysterious light shone from the tall ceiling within the zone. It was either illuminated by luminous mushrooms or magic. The bright lights kept the dungeons bright and the surroundings visible. When exploring the place, it was still advisable to use Bug Light though.

This place was several hundred meters underground. They had passed through the depths of Palms to a bigger battle zone 'Abyss Shaft'; a conservative estimate of the amount of soil above their heads would be several million tons. For Adventurers who were mainly students and working adults, it was very pressuring.

The complex sewage openings around the premises meant monsters could launch sneak attack at any time, intensifying the pressure. The raid was hard. They were not holding back either. The difficulty of this zone was tougher than Vuorinen expected.

They had to spend 8 to 10 hours battling dozens of rounds with monsters daily. This was their limit. Every fight was challenging, and they needed time to recover too. Their exploration area was still very limited.

Contrary to expectations, the trio was not discouraged at all.

Even the elites of Silver Sword were feeling the heat. Compared to normal Adventurers, this trio was full of life and vigor. This didn't seem to be the effect of skills and equipment, but rather because of their nature.

"I'm going to do it okay. Anytime now. Don't fall for me alright?"

"Enough, just get on with it!"

"Fufu. Here I come. In response to everyone's request... listen to my song! 'Aurora Heal'!"

Colorful lights from the entire spectrum of the rainbow shone bright, healing the wounds of all allies in range slowly. The area attack of the Orcus Jellies did not only target the members holding down the defense line. Melee attackers using swords and axes would also take damage. A member of the 2nd party Federico was already at half health. It was the duty of Vuorinen to heal him when he had the time to spare. But with the monsters' fierce attack at hand, Vuorinen had to give the priority to the tanks.

In order to cover for Vuorinen who rushed out to support Demiqas, Tetora was using a big spell with long casting time to mass heal.

"I did it! I am so smart and cute, so perfect!"

"That's the truth, although your attitude disgusts me, I am grateful for the fix! Take this!"

"Focus your attacks! Keep your melee area attacks down!"

Shiroe cast support spells for Tetora. At the same time, Federico whose wounds were on the mend returned to the front lines.

While listening to the cheerful voice behind him, Vuorinen cast consecutive healing spells at Demiqas.

Orcus Jellies seemed like nothing but trouble for melee fighters and tanks. Acidic slime would spurt out when they were attacked from close range, an effective counterattack. The acidic smog caused area damage and debuffs, another headache. Dealing with one was bad, facing 4 or 5 at once was even more of a pain.

"Come back Demiqas!"

"To be held back by these small fries...!"

Demiqaas roared as he retreated with Phantom Step. His hands were smoking from the acid. The wear and tear on his weapons seemed rather serious.

"Damn it, heal me!"

"Don't need to shout, I can hear you."

Vuorinen started to chant. Demiqas was on the verge of dying, and would fall if this kept up. Demiqas returned because he understood the risk, but his attitude was bad.

Demiqaas seemed unhappy with Vuorinen's response and glared at him. His eyes seemed to be saying, 'If you know, then hurry up!'

Vuorinen sighed.

Demiqaas was troublesome.

As a fellow party member, Vuorinen wished Demiqas would tone it down.

If he kept up his solitary strikes, his heal work would be compromised. Attacking without considering the casting range would cause the formation to crumble.

Demiqaas had racked up several deaths. In a raid group with dozens of Adventurers, there were sure to be members with a healing class, so they could be revived with no issues. For Adventurers in raiding guilds like Vuorinen, death was just equivalent to fainting, but it also meant they would not be able to move when they went down. The overall performance of the group would drop with death.

No matter how dumb he might be, he had learned to avoid dying. But even if he retreated just before he fell, it was still unacceptable in terms of efficiency. When Demiqas was recovering, the 1st party had to cover for him.

Demiqaas' reckless charge was reinforced by the kindness of the people around him. The support stopping would lead to the whole group falling into ruins.

(But...)

Vuorinen thought as he cast Healing Wind and Heartbeat Healing, rushing back to the front lines alongside Demiqas. But even so, it was only fair to say that Demiqas was a good player.

They had spent 3 weeks exploring the depths of the underground dungeon. There had been many brutal battles in this period. Although they had never been wiped out completely, all the participating members had been killed more than 10 times.

In normal circumstances, people would want to vent their anger at their surroundings when faced with such pressure. For Shiroe and his group from Log Horizon to maintain their optimism was abnormal.

Vuorinen thought he was an elite in raids.

Led by the famous William, Vuorinen felt like a veteran who had been through hell.

Not only Vuorinen, all other members of Silver Sword were confident that they were the strongest guild in the server and they were proud of it.

But the guild specializing in raids and striving to be the strongest had its share of troubles. The core group has fallen to about 80 percent after the Catastrophe, about 40 members are left. There were some who had quit raiding even though they still retained guild membership.

That was because raid battles in a zone that matched the level of the Adventurers were brutal.

The top guild D.D.D playing around in the Citadel of Seven Falls of about level 50 was evidence of this.

In the eyes of Vuorinen and the others, it was a joke. A bunch of level 90s running around a level 50 zone? Instead of being a major battle guild, it was more like a major fun and games guild.

But he could not dismiss Demiqas because of this pride. This dim witted burly Monk was unable to understand the meaning of cooperation. He was unwilling to listen to others and gave them a ton of trouble. His attitude was poor, lacking all the essential elements for fighting raids.

But Demiqas was no coward.

Even D.D.D was hesitant when fighting level 90 end game content. But this martial artist did not slow down when facing the torrent of violence and death. He did not shy away from contact with monsters, and his eyes were unwavering.

Vuorinen knew that Demiqas' jealousy for Shiroe and Silver Sword were part of the reason. But fear was not something you can overcome with jealousy. There was no way Demiqas could handle the slime ball monsters more than twice his height by throwing tantrums.

Vuorinen had no answers, and could only add protective barriers on Demiqas and himself.

The situation was dire.

The exploration was not progressing well. Even Silver Sword was losing self-restraint and was on the verge of exploding. The most brutal battles in the whole server were probably here. They couldn't just let the vagrant continue to run amok. Vuorinen continued to commit to his duty as a healer to keep his party healthy as he rushed around the battlefield.

Part 6

William who held the trust of Silver Sword was suffering.

After finishing the battle for the day, in the elaborate temporary base camp, William tossed out the papers documenting the results of the exploration. He stretched his back so far out that he almost toppled the canvas chair he was sitting on.

"It's not going well."

"Right."

Sitting beside him was Log Horizon's Shiroe. This young man in glasses was mapping out the area with an accuracy William could never match. William stretched out his legs wide, rocked his chair and sighed. He knew he was furrowing his brow.

"How many to go?"

"Well..."

Shiroe traced his finger on the gigantic map.

"There are 3, no, 4 more."

This was an estimate of the number of raid bosses left in the zone.

Although there were all sorts of raid zones, this one appeared to be a typical multi stage raid zone. Raid dungeons were more challenging versions of normal dungeons, containing raid content.

Compared to party level dungeon zones, there were many more passages and rooms. There might even be traps and puzzles. Humongous areas lay within the key areas of the zone, and powerful raid bosses stood guard in them.

All the enemies were at raid level strength. Since this area was designed for a 24 person Full Raid, a party of 6 would never stand a chance. Even with a Full Raid group, there was still a chance you would be wiped out if you let down your guard. Silver Sword would be able to expedite their exploration process if they were facing normal monsters. But they were still stuck with filling the gaps in the map for now.

The problem lay with the raid bosses which required different tactics from normal monsters.

They had taken down '1st of the garden' Vandemi and '5th of the garden' Eroraider. Both of them were powerful and had special abilities which required complicated tactics to defeat.

"This is tedious."

"The fights with these 2 bosses were really close."

That was expected in raid boss battles.

Simply gathering powerful members wouldn't even get you to the fight, let alone lead you to victory.

Both of the fights didn't go perfectly, and they barely avoided being wiped out, with a handful out of the 24 escaping to safety. The other members were revived in safety, and this process was repeated 20 odd times. Including combat resuscitation, all the members had been incapacitated multiple times.

But some good did come out of this. Orcus Jelly, Mutant Griffon, Venom Hydrangea and Murderous Minotaur dropped lots of high quality materials such as primordial mud, variant leather and comet metal only available through raids. These were high class items production class Adventurers could use to create quality equipment worth a fortune.

They also obtained 7 phantasmal class equipment after defeating 1st of the garden Vandemi and 5th of the garden Eroraider.

These equipment were a huge motivation for major guilds fighting to be the very best like no one ever was. The loot this round were types that they had never seen before. They were not only an upgrade of phantasmal class level equipment, it was a glorious accomplishment they could be proud of.

Shiroe poured out coffee from the pot that was 20cm tall. William counted the number of days they had left as he watched Shiroe's action.

"Ten days is our limit."

"..."

William was concerned about their supplies.

As they fought on, the Adventurers' equipment would suffer wear and tear. Death would cause even more damage which could not be mended by resuscitation spells. To keep the equipment in working condition, they had to constantly maintain them.

This was common sense in Elder Tales and William had already taken this into account. Such multi stage raids had always been a headache since the Elder Tales days. The members of the raid had subclasses of Blacksmith, Armor Craftsman, Seamstress and Carpenters. Doing maintenance when not engaging in battle was the norm for major guilds.

But repairs required materials. Without proper facilities, the material consumption rate was much more intense. And a guild like Silver Sword was full of members with phantasmal level equipment, which required phantasmal materials as well.

Apart from the maintenance of equipment, they also needed to take note of expendable items. That was the case for William's Holy Crystal Comet arrows. The powerful arrows were made by craftsmen from phantasmal materials. A skilled craftsman could make 500 arrows from Holy Rainbow Quartz. But 500 was not enough for consecutive

battles like these. William had already expended 2000 of the 10,000 he had prepared. Other diminishing expendable items included potions, balms, talismans and scrolls.

This meant that the supplies for raid battles were gathered from other raid battles, a vicious cycle.

To upkeep the equipment you got from raid battles, you would need to get materials from raid battles. By going through such cycles, you would obtain the power to challenge harder raid battles. If you succeeded in challenging a higher level raid, you would get even better equipment. And to maintain them, you would need to continue fighting difficult raids.

Historically, raiding guilds would periodically conduct raids of a lower level in order to maintain balance in the cycle. The purpose was to resupply. But with the Fairy Rings out of commission because of the Catastrophe, it was difficult to visit the raids spread all over the world. But even if that were not an issue, Silver Sword was a proud battle guild. Unless there was a pressing issue for resupply, they would rather not visit lower level raid zones.

William had kept on fighting after the Catastrophe.

He did not regret it, but he had exhausted a large portion of his resources and materials. In terms of Full Raid battles, William was confident that this group was the strongest within the server. But their finances were in a pitiful state.

"I have resources prepared from Akiba as well."

"How long will it last us?"

"Adding it in, we can last for 20 more days."

Shiroe replied bitterly. William heard that Log Horizon was a small guild with just 8 members. Supplying the elites of Silver Sword for 10 days was amazing. But that didn't change the situation. Downing 2 bosses took 3 weeks, and twice that number in 20 days would be hard. From past experience, bosses would get harder in the later stages.

And William had another concern.

Which was the origin of the man before him.

The silent Shiroe who seemed to have many secrets hid his true thinking behind his expression.

This zone itself was unnatural.

'1st of the garden' Vandemi.

'5th of the garden' Erroraider.

Even without seeing the other bosses, William could take a stab at their names. Probably '2nd of the garden' Mezarakurau, '3rd of the garden' Ibura Habura and '4th of the garden' Tarutaurugar. The bosses guarding this zone were the pride of 9 Great Prisons of Heroes, having the same form and name as their administrator. But they were not totally the same of course. In the expansion pack Heart of Fantasy, they were known as '1st of the prison' Vandemi and '5th of the prison' Erroraider. The raid bosses took the form of winged snakes and of a white horse which you would never forget. They made their appearance again after a slight change in name and color palette. They had also become stronger and discarded their old fighting patterns.

Games that recycled characters living in the database were common. This zone was just one of many examples. There should be some lore behind them if this world was still a game. Shiroe had not divulged the things he was hiding for some reason.

He was not in a position to nag at others.

This was William's true feeling.

He did think his group was wrong. He had no regrets over leaving Akiba or going through multiple raids in the north. Although he had no qualms about it, he felt that Silver Sword had distanced itself from the others. Man could not improve just by avoiding mistakes. William didn't want to know about all that. He just wanted to be the best and that would be enough. If his comrades felt intimidated, he, William, could wipe away their worries with just a shout.

But he understood that he could not keep this up and had to face reality.

He didn't want to admit it, but William thought he might be wrong.

He was wrong to reject Shiroe's invitation and leave the Round Table Council.

William wanted to talk about this with Shiroe.

But William was not sure what Shiroe was up to, and it seemed Shiroe was suffering from the secrets he was withholding. It was hard to lower his hold and ask Shiroe to address his doubts. William was not an adult and he didn't want to be such an adult.

He mocked his childlike pride. He also had thoughts thinking that this was just fine.

The deteriorating supplies issue, fighting raid battles deep underground with no ready means of escape. In this situation which was worsening by the minute, what could he say to motivate his Silver Sword comrades? What could a loser like him who had only taken Elder Tales gaming seriously since birth say to his men?

William didn't think he could say anything. He was just going about this on a whim.

He felt like a child waving a weapon around to show his bravado. But he should make use of the weapon since he had one that was only natural. That was what William decided as a gamer.

"What do you think Shiroe?"

"About what?"

William scratched his head roughly when he heard that response.

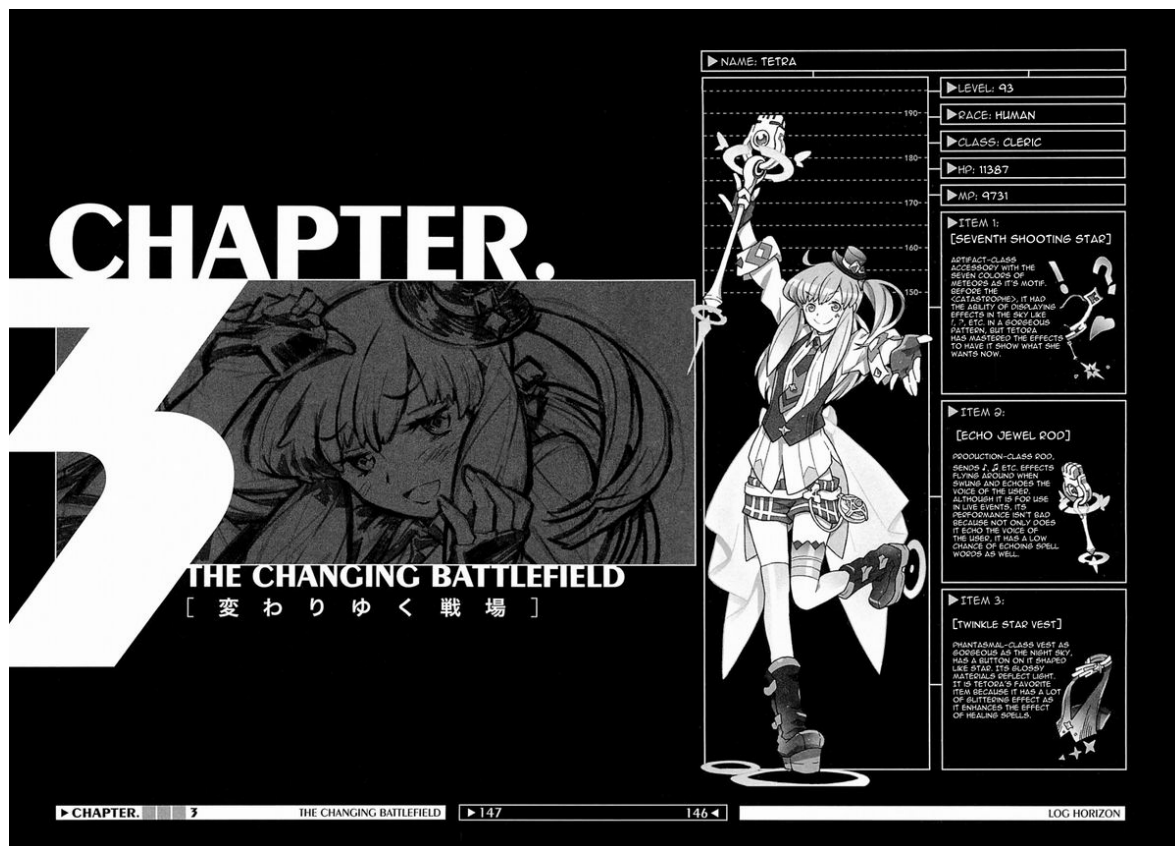
He had no answer ready for Shiroe's query.

William also needed a chance. To take up the challenge or give up.

To prove that he was someone or to become someone. What was the different between Demiqaas who had lost his way and was picking fights wherever he went and Silver Sword?

The chance was before him, in the battle. That's what William determined.

So he strove on despite the hardships.



Chapter 3: The Changing Battlefield

Part 1

"This is irritating."

Naotsugu complained.

He grabbed a rag from his bag to clean the stains on his Armor of Silver Oath and Gaze of Lionheart Shield. He had already cleaned his equipment with the waters conjured by the Summoners with their Undines. The filth from some monsters was harmful to equipment, so cleaning up was important in the aftermath of battles.

"What irritates you Mr Naotsugu?"

Tetora who was cleaning her flashy wand asked.

As members of the 2nd party, the duo spent a lot of their time together. Demiqas was moody and moved alone, Vuorinen and Federico spent their time working with the other members of Silver Sword. Filling in as the strategist of this raid, Shiroe worked closely with William and was often summoned by him.

This meant Naotsugu and Tetora spent a lot of time together.

"Maybe the stain will never come off. It might be a curse."

"What a creepy thing for an idol wannabe to say."

"For a super charismatic girl like me, it is my natural speech and actions that made me popular. Because I am cute."

"Yeah right."

The expedition for the day hadn't ended. It was now noon, so they were taking a break and preparing for lunch. They were doing simple maintenance on their equipment by cleaning them by hand, but part of the reason was because Naotsugu had nothing else to do.

"I am not talking about the equipment."

"Okay. So you are thinking about me?"

"No way."

Naotsugu denied without hesitation.

If you forced him to decide between like or dislike, Naotsugu would categorize Tetora under the like column.

Chatting with her was fun and not a bother. She was a good partner when they talked about nonsense. Speaking your mind without thinking was very refreshing. It was silly but healing for the soul. He didn't talk about panties all day because of his fetish.

"You look so down. Want to look at panties?"

"As if I'd do that."

"I think miniskirts are better than hot pants."

"Let's drop this topic."

"No I want to stick with this. Fufufu."

Tetora seemed to be plotting something as she stuck onto Naotsugu with a smug face. Naotsugu then said 'Hey, back off, that's irritating' and peeled her off of him. Being toyed around like that was troubling. Tetora was small and nimble, crawling onto Naotsugu when he let his guard down. Naotsugu couldn't attack her seriously so he could only react passively.

Tetora knew Naotsugu couldn't do anything to her so she didn't let up on disturbing him. She was just teasing him. How mean of her. And she knew she was cute, which made it even more terrible.

"I say, doesn't seeing panties make you happy?"

"Ah, what?"

She said it so naturally that it caught Naotsugu off guard and he didn't give a proper reply.

"It's like a 'Wow!' That sort of feeling? When you see the panties of a cute girl like me, you will be energized to work the whole day, like a high five with god! Don't you feel that way?"

Tetora was not joking with Naotsugu, she was expressing her heartfelt thoughts. Naotsugu had to agree with her words, but he refused to express this with his attitude.

"Even if that's true, that's too arrogant."

"I understand this feeling more than anyone! I really am a natural idol! You are allowed to let your heart race for me okay?"

Tetora who was snorting her nose smugly was very impressive. Naotsugu had to admit it. Not minding the other details, this Cleric was smiling all the time.

This was an important Moe point. Naotsugu strongly believed that a smile was the greatest gift girls could give to the people around them.

And Naotsugu would think about Maryele when he was with Tetora.

Her smile reminded him of Maryele.

The frequency was high, even when Tetora was not around.

He was not after the wonderful soft pressure. But even so, it was really troubling.

Life back on earth was much simpler. Naotsugu landed a job and his life was getting stable. He hadn't had a girlfriend for a while, so it wouldn't affect his future dating life. Although there were great aspects in the life of Adventurers, it seemed more unstable when he thought about things like that. Running amok. The feelings of Maryele were also important. On the flip side, it was not good to drag it too long, Naotsugu thought as he scratched his face.

"Ahh, that's not how it is!"

"Wah!? Why are you yelling?"

Tetora who had sneaked to Naotsugu's side was shocked, falling to the stone cold dungeon floor on her butt. Naotsugu waved his hands to play it down. "Nothing, my bad, sorry." He pulled Tetora up with his hand.

Naotsugu's train of thought was disrupted and he lamented, "Well, such things do happen in life."

"Mr Naotsugu, you are like a grade-schooler who wrote a love letter to the beautiful teacher on a test, and was found out by your classmates."

"What is with this awfully specific comment?"

"Fufufu. So, what is the thing that is bothering you?"



Tetora's face told Naotsugu that she wouldn't let him run away. But it was a good chance if Tetora wanted to talk about this. Naotsugu wanted to take advantage of this misunderstanding.

"Ah, it's about Shiroe." Naotsugu said as he faked a troubled expression.

Tetora's smug expression shone bright. This equated to Tetora saying 'Way to go! How brilliant of me to ask the crucial question!' or something like that. Tetora puffed out her chest like a hopeless idiot.

Naotsugu couldn't depend on Tetora's healing all the time.

The trouble was real, but Naotsugu pondered on how to put his thoughts into words.

"Hey, lunch is ready."

Federico approached with a box like container. It was filled with asparagus and meat stew. Although Naotsugu was slow to react, Tetora received the box with a smile and said, "Thank you Mr Federico."

As expected of a self-proclaimed idol, Tetora was really popular. The raid group accepted her as one of them in no time and treated her well. She probably had fans too.

Naotsugu could tell from the smile on Federico's mustached face as he said, "It's my pleasure." He seemed friendlier than he looked from the way he delivered the food. Demiqas and Vuorinen had probably received their share. They were getting used to the duo from Silver Sword taking care of the menial chores. Naotsugu didn't think that this would have happened.

"Eat up Mr Naotsugu. Remember to tell me what's up after this."

"Okay."

Naotsugu answered directly as he searched for a suitable place to sit.

This was one of the many small rooms in the Abyss Shaft zone. Small was a relative term in this dungeon, the room was actually 15m by 15m big, about the size of a mini sports complex. The giant pillar might not be grandiose, but was still decorated by carvings. In terms of atmosphere, it had a religious feel to it with the glowing light coming from the high ceiling.

There were lots of empty rooms like this around this area. The morning was spent clearing all the monsters in the area.

A granite pillar stump of just the right size was used by them as a bench.

"Chow time!"

"Time to eat!"

(There is an amazingly large piece of meat in the stew,) Naotsugu thought as he chewed on a mouthful. It was a pain to explain. The core of the problem lay with Shiroe, but things not going smoothly was just a gut feel.

Simply put, Naotsugu didn't understand why Shiroe was so troubled, that was it.

But this human known as Shiroe worried too much and burdened himself with too much work and responsibility. That's why people other than Naotsugu thought Shiroe wore a bitter expression full of worry all the time.

Naotsugu didn't think so.

Shiroe might have a sour face, but there were interesting things about him too. There were times when Shiroe lazed around and broke bottles because of clumsiness as well. He had seen him sleeping on the table with an 'I don't care anymore' expression on his face multiple times.

But for those who were unfamiliar with Shiroe, he always seemed to be thinking about complicated issues. He sometimes mumbled to himself but always solved the issues in the end. Naotsugu found it hard to tell what Shiroe's limit was and it was hard for him to explain to those around him.

Because his normal serious face was no different from his expression in a crisis, Naotsugu couldn't explain how to differentiate between them. Naotsugu understood, but it was more of a gut feel.

Shiroe right now looked more troubled than normal.

But that was just a gut feel.

And it was hard to explain.

"Shiroe," Naotsugu said slowly, "How should I put it, seems to be in a crisis."

"Seems?"

"Yeah."

"Let's help him then."

Tetora skewered her asparagus and decided.

"Don't take this so lightly, it's hard to execute." Naotsugu answered.

"The world calls him Black Heart Glasses, but he actually has a delicate ego. Is it okay to involve others? Will it be fine to work on this alone? That's what he is thinking about."

"Is that so? He is mentally a shut-in."

"I can't deny that."

"He needs an idol!"

"That won't be necessary."

"So why are we in this super rural cave?"

(Because we need money,) Naotsugu thought, but knew that this was not really an answer. Shiroe had no interest in piling up gold and watching it. Money was a means to achieve something. That was the case with Crescent Burger. This time, the purpose of getting the money remained unclear, so Naotsugu was unable to answer.

He wanted to buy the bank zone for the formation of the Round Table. His purpose was not in owning the bank. It was a negotiation chip used to converse with the Adventurers of Akiba, a means to an end.

What did he want to do with the money? What's the meaning behind it? Thinking back, Naotsugu did not hear of the plan from Shiroe. A man he could trust without knowing everything, that's his friend Shiroe. But it was hard to explain this to the third party Tetora.

(Reason, the reason...)

Naotsugu tilted his head as he thought. Inspiration struck.

"Just a guess, but it is to protect our home."

"Home?"

"I'm not talking about a physical building. I mean a place you reside in or something like that."

"You mean a guild?"

"Not just a guild. I don't really understand either."

Naotsugu chewed on the bread he dipped in the stew as he thought about what to say.

"In order to survive, we will need things to eat and have a roof over our heads. And also, comrades. A place to live with them is necessary no matter what. That means a family in the old world, but a guild in this one."

Naotsugu had been watching Maryele and the Crescent Moon Alliance for the past 6 months.

A place for everyone to relax. Get up from bed, work, have dinner, play and sleep after a hard day's work.

Most importantly, the warm and gentle smile that held all this together.

"But even a guild needs a home."

"Huh?"

Naotsugu tried explaining to the confused Tetora. Even Naotsugu was unsure about this, digging this up from the depths of his own heart.

"Speaking of home that will mean Akiba too. Having a guild in an empty world won't do. Because all sorts of things are interconnected. Even a guild needs a home as well. Be it an organization that provides convenient services or a guild of a friend. The places where we are interconnected with others needs to be treated with care too."

That should be it.

This was the reason that Shiroe was fighting so passionately for when forming the Round Table.

"The city is a gigantic place belonging to everyone. If the city is suffering, all the homes will suffer. In order to protect his home, Shiroe is willing to take on the city or even more powerful enemies."

"... A home."

Naotsugu was worried about Tetora not getting what he was saying, but he saw an unexpected expression. That was a smug, gentle and strong smile.

"It is important to protect our home. It is important for us wolves. Mr Shiroe must be quite a guy to command such expectations from Mr Naotsugu... I really mean it, he is more than what the rumors made him out to be. It's the same for my guild, we are not sure what to do."

"Is Light Indigo not doing too good? I don't know much about the guild, but did your numbers fall drastically after the Catastrophe?"

"Not really. In summary of our conversation, Light Indigo is not a guild or a home. It is more like a holding place."

"What is that, an idol training center?"

Naotsugu asked in confusion. Tetora clapped her hands and declared "I am full", then proceeded to poke at Naotsugu's face and continued.

"That's probably it. We are idols who exist to protect the homes in everyone's heart. Following along is the right call! My charm radar is beeping here. I will follow this raid to the end even if I have to leave Light Indigo!"

Naotsugu was not sure why Tetora was smiling so smugly, so he just replied "I'm counting on you."

Part 2

"Haachoo!"

"Ara ara, what an unlady like way to sneeze."

"I can't help it, my nose itches."

Henrietta lectured Maryele's etiquette as they sat around a table in the warm hall.

Henrietta surveyed the room looking for the source of the cold air, but the Crescent Moon Alliance dining hall was as peaceful as usual.

The ceiling was high in order to accommodate all the members for meals. Crescent Moon Alliance had over 40 members now, and it was not easy to take in so many members. Nevertheless, they still prepared 2 big tables that could seat 16 each. If they kept the chairs, all the members would be able to squeeze in.

The rowdy hall during meal time was a quiet place for the guild master Maryele and her confidant Henrietta to relax at night. It gave off a cozy atmosphere.

They went through many trials and difficulties in Akiba since the Catastrophe.

There were not just sad times, but also happy times that made you want to dance. After going through all sorts of things, the city seemed to remember the way it should be after the Libra Festival. It is a different kind of happiness compared to the formation of the Round Table Council, but the expressions of the people reflected the prosperity and peace they were enjoying.

Although the winter was harsher than the original world, life remained stable in Akiba.

Maryele thought so too.

Maryele endured much stress as a guild master for the past half year, but she had started to relax recently. It's all because Henrietta said, "If you put on a sour face all day, you will turn into a cranky grandma." During that moment she was lectured, the members of the guild averted their eyes from Maryele. She must not forget to smile, she had been too tense even though she didn't mean to be.

She needed to reflect on this, Maryele sighed softly.

The lecturing party Henrietta seemed rather cheerful lately.

Asuka was helping Henrietta with the finances. Although she had to attend to the Round Table Council frequently, Henrietta had found time to relax in the afternoon.

The 2 old friends warmed their hands with the mugs as they took tiny sips of cocoa.

"...? ...?"

"Ara, Nanami, what is it?"

Henrietta asked the young girl who was peeping in from the doorway. She watched Maryele's side of the table, warily avoiding Henrietta.

The young girl joined the guild very recently and was still shy.

One source of her insecurities was Henrietta who was trying to sip her cocoa inconspicuously. But Maryele wouldn't miss the corners of Henrietta's mouth which were cramping with a smile.

The day Nanami came to the guild, Henrietta was overjoyed, grinding the young girl like a pay per use dryer. She tirelessly toyed with Nanami like a dress up doll, going through over 30 costumes. When Nanami burst into tears, her protector Hein the Assassin protested Henrietta's action strongly. Henrietta finally restrained her instinct to cuddle cute and small things.

Even though Henrietta was reflecting on her actions, Nanami was still traumatized by the ordeal. She seemed ready to bolt at any moment.

"Want to sit on my lap?"

Maryele grabbed Nanami by her waist and put her gently on her lap.

The young Nanami was finally able to see the objects on the table up close.

The long table that could seat 16 was filled with Maryele's carpentry tools, Henrietta's accounting books, 2 mugs of cocoa and things like bags. Henrietta placed the carving knife into the bag for safety. Maryele was thankful for Henrietta's attention to details.

As Nanami fidgeted on Maryele's lap with her eyes wide open, Maryele could feel her mouth breaking into a smile. She couldn't express it properly in words, but Maryele felt a motherly urge to care for her.

The atmosphere of the hall was warm and peaceful under the gentle glow of magic light. They could see the 2 Chefs preparing dinner from part of the kitchen visible from the doorway. You could also hear the conversation from the corridor and the greetings of comrades returning home as well as those welcoming them.

Nanami smelled like freshly cleaned clothes. Maryele probably smelled the same. For Maryele, this was like a bond between families.

"Want some cocoa? Or are you looking for Hein?"

Nanami was surprised by Henrietta who offered her mug with her head tilted. Nanami looked up at Maryele, then the cocoa, and then at Henrietta. Henrietta smiled and said "take it" as she passed the mug to the stunned young girl.

Nanami carefully received the mug that was too big for her, and drank from it.

"!"

An impactful sense of sweetness.

Nanami face was frozen in surprise.

Among Adventurers, the girl knew surprisingly little of their old world. Everything was amazing, and she desired to learn about it all. The amused members of Crescent Moon Alliance doted on her and taught Nanami all sorts of knowledge, but Nanami still liked Hein who she knew first the most. She looked unsettled when Hein was not around, searching for the big brother she could rely on.

(We can educate her about such things slowly.)

Maryele thought as she took care not to let Nanami slip off.

Nanami who had been sipping the cocoa slowly suddenly froze.

Concerned about Nanami's troubled look, Maryele looked over and saw that there was only a bit of cocoa left.

'I drank the whole thing, what I should do, this belongs to Henrietta!!'... She was probably thinking something like that. Nanami was acting suspiciously because she felt that she had done something wrong. Maryele smiled as she watched Nanami.

"Don't mind her, Umeko won't get angry over something like this."

"But addressing me as Umeko will make me angry."

The icy retorts made Maryele feign fear. The face Nanami made as she stared at the both of them was so cute that they laughed out loud. This interaction affirmed that both Henrietta and she felt the same warm feeling, making Maryele even happier. (My guild, the Crescent Moon Alliance is a great home, a place to be proud of.)

'... Hey! It's cold out here!'

These energetic words which didn't really serve as a greeting made Nanami spring up and look around.

"That's probably Hein. He should be at the entrance."

Nanami didn't notice Henrietta's attempt to curry favor with her, so she simply nodded with gratitude and leaped off Maryele's lap. Maryele caught Nanami and let her down gently with a smile. Nanami then ran off with unsteady steps that made them worry.

"Really."

"What is it?"

"I am jealous of how popular Hein is."

"That's because you traumatized her, Umeko."

"Ma. Ry. ele."

The two of them broke out in laughter.

They had played around like this since old times, but this always filled Maryele with joy.

"... So the sneeze from earlier was because of Naotsugu right?"

"Woo wah!"

Maryele's only gained the upper hand momentarily.

Her friend who knew her so well approached her with a menacing smile.

"Was it Mr Naotsugu? Did Mr Naotsugu talk about you?"

"How would I know?"

Even in this magical world, detecting such things instantly was impossible.

"Alright then, why not ask him through telepathy."

Pushing aside the logic of the fantasy world they were living in, Henrietta forced Maryele to a corner.

It might be a mistake to discuss matters of the heart with this dear friend of hers, Maryele had already regretted this hundreds of time. Henrietta might be working hard and doing a huge amount of work, but her interest in bullying small girls and Maryele was so mean. Just like a scary mother in law.

"Boo~ Spare me~"

"Why?"

"Even if you ask, it is not convenient for me to say..." She was at a loss, averting her eyes and becoming defensive. She intertwined the fingers of her hands together.

"It's just that."

"Huh?"

"Telepathy once a day, at 9pm after dinner."

"..."

Maryele's words silenced the room as Henrietta digested the news. Finally, Henrietta's sigh deflated in reply.

"Ha ah!?"

"I... I won't say it again!"

Maryele said as Henrietta made a rare expression with her mouth open wide in the shape of a rectangle.

"Because, he is in a raid right? He is working hard! It is a matter of life and death, he might die okay? Naotsugu is definitely soldiering on, Shiroe is thinking really hard, so we can't disturb them. So we made a promise to only use telepathy after they made camp at night..."

Henrietta sighed as she used her finger to press against her forehead.

Her dear friend seemed so rude. Henrietta didn't seem to understand Maryele's well-meaning intentions.

"That's not what I am asking, well, maybe I was... So he contacted you every day?"

"Yes."

Maryele didn't seem to understand the situation and nodded her head.

"I will tell him about Akiba's condition and things about Akatsuki. Well, I told him about Nanami last night. Didn't we made new boots for Nanami? I told him about it. I also told him how we bought the rubber boots together and about Nanami and Hein dancing at the entrance. That's right, I mentioned about the tandoori chicken too. Naotsugu said that he wants to taste some too. Naotsugu is so big and strong, he can eat 3 right? It is spicy so he can take 4! We also chat about how great milkshakes are, so we should grab lunch together some time. The time is up before I realized. Na Na, don't you think the tandoori chicken is delicious too Henrietta?"

"Hah."

Henrietta stood up as if she were suffering from heartburn.

"What is it?"

"I, I need to send something to the Production Guild Liaison Committee before dinner."

"Is that so?"

"Even if I am starving, I won't be able to eat dinner if this keeps up. Maryele you, really... how should I put this..."

Maryele bid farewell to her depressed dear friend walking out of the hall. This was another normal day for Crescent Moon Alliance.

Maryele had unknowingly gained another point in the scoreboard inside Henrietta's mind.

The fight here was as intense as a raid battle.

Part 3

According to the scouting reports, a set of dark purple armor was sitting motionlessly in the middle of the giant basin-like arena. A Cannoneer used the skill Lock on Sight to scan it from 100m away. The enemy was about 16m in height, probably a golem or a giant.

The detection radius of a raid boss was special and wide. The arena would probably turn into a battlefield the moment William's group entered.

The enemy was '7th of the garden' Ruseato.

This enemy looked similar to '7th of the prison' Ruseato he fought countless times in the raid 9 Great Prisons of Heroes. The stats and tactics had probably been strengthened while retaining its specialty. According to the reconnaissance report of the scouting team, '7th of the garden' Ruseato probably had dual modes of black knight and white knight. The memory of the 2 modes interchanging as they attacked was still fresh on his mind, a difficult boss.

William raised his hand above shoulder level.

He knew the eyes of the raid group were on him.

They had convened a meeting before this. The scouting team attacked several times, using their deaths in exchange for valuable data. The strategy built on the information had been acknowledge by Shiroe of Log Horizon to have a '50/50 chance of success.' This number wasn't too bad for the first try.

With the preparations done, he felt a heat wave rise from his back.

William seized this moment and threw his hand down.

The troops burst ahead like water from the dam with the signal. The 1st party led the way, leaping down from the audience seats which surrounded the arena.

They slid down the crumbling wall moving onwards, onwards.

The attack range of a monster was normally proportional to its size.

For Goblins which were less than 140cm in height, their range was several dozen centimeters barehanded. Their reach could go up to 1 meter when using kicks or equipped with spears. But for trolls which were 2m high, you had to give 3m allowance for the reach of their clubs. The humongous raid boss in front of them definitely had an absurd attack range.

Silver Sword took Shiroe's advice and used 10m, 15m and 20m as a benchmark to train their formation. They learned to gauge the distance through their sight and feel, cutting down on error when estimating the range of the attack.

But that would be after they launched their attack. They needed to move into the attack range of the enemy stealthily, with the tanks in the front and the vulnerable mages and ranged attackers at a safe distance. They would need to shift their distance, moving back and forth to stay out of the boss' range while being close enough to attack. If they did not make use of the raid boss' blind spot in their strategy, the rear guards would not be able to survive the raid boss level attack.

That's how damaging a hit from the enemy was.

Dinkuron led from the front and charged into the 20m range like a whirlwind. '7th of the garden' Ruseato came alive and stood up. Light from the red luminous fluid flowing within the mechanical armor could be seen through gaps as it lifted its oversized halberd up high. Dinkuron grit his teeth and raised his shield to shoulder the strike. His effort paid off as the heavily armored Guardian from Silver Sword endured the first attack of the raid boss.

The damage was slight, about 10 percent of his total hit points.

But that didn't mean the attack power of the enemy was weak. Dinkuron was buffed by a protection barrier before the battle started. A high level Kannagi could cast a shield which negated 4500 points of damage. This meant the attack broke through the barrier completely and hurt Dinkuron. Without the protection barrier, this attack would take out more than 30 percent of Dinkuron's health bar.

What a powerful attack.

But this was within their expectations. The dispelled barrier was recast.

The vanguard of the 1st party Dinkuron the Guardian was the toughest steel at the tip of the arrow. Supported by multiple healing spells, the iron warrior made his way to the feet of '7th of the garden' Ruseato and cast Anchor Howl and Taunting Shout multiple times.

The fight started here.

"Begin the attack!"

William commanded from the 3rd party.

With the support song of Bards buffing them, all sorts of physical and magical attacks rained onto the raid boss. It was hard to check the status screen in raids, but there was definitely a stupendous number of debuffs cast on Ruseato. This was the reason behind gathering all 12 classes for Full Raids. The same debuff could not stack, but this could be overcome by using a variety of spells instead, which worked wonderfully when fighting powerful enemies.

The consecutive attacks lit the sky; the earth trembled from the explosions.

Ruseato swung his humongous steel weapon in a 10m circle, attempting to end all life within this range. This strike caused 2 deaths and brought several melee fighters to the brink of death.

Even Dinkuron lost half of his health bar to this cruel attack.

But Silver Sword held the line.

Kannagi had the resuscitation spell 'Soul Call Prayer', which teleported dead comrades to their sides before reviving them. A convenient spell which extracted allies to a safe distance in order to heal them. Recovery was supported by the Carbuncle conjured by a Summoner. The magic-attack classes had health recovery spells too. They might be weaker than their healer class counterpart, but it helped to relieve the burden of the healing specialists.

The healers other than the Kannagi prioritized healing the wounded. Dinkuron did not back down as he went head to head against Ruseato.

The powerful strike that swept one round was probably the special attack of the raid boss.

The members of Silver Sword would etch this blow into their memory. The Summoner beside William squeezed a cute and fluffy Carbuncle and started counting time. The sound reached the ears of all their allies.

Without exception, all special attacks of raid bosses had conditions.

The main condition was their recast time. Powerful attacks would not be launched in rapid succession. Each skill had its own cool down time. It might be 10 seconds or 30 seconds, but it definitely existed.

As planned, the Summoner started counting to gauge the cool down time. But he didn't neglect his attacking duties and kept his damage per second up.

When Elder Tales was still a game, the time was tracked by a 3rd party software or just by a physical stopwatch. Every move of the raid boss was recorded for reference and analyzed by the millisecond. With reference to the timer, the attack damage, attribute, area, rate, animation, penetration, critical chance, all these were taken note of.

The challengers would also share their information on the cloud servers and discuss it on the forums. They would then try again with better tactics and strategies.

"18, 19, 20, 21..."

The hoarse but steady count of the male Summoner mixed with the noise of steel on steel, clashes of the sword and the reverberating sound of thunder and fire.

All the members focused on the count and the enemy before them.

Silver Sword continued to challenge raids in this world swallowed by chaos using primitive and awkward tactics.

The strong guild of the past had fallen on hard times.

Covered in dirt and forced to the edge, they concentrated on the count and their will for victory.

When the count hit 26, '7th of the garden' Ruseato's colossal halberd raised. The horrible strike came again.

But William's comrades were fearless.

The Assassins and Swashbucklers leapt into the air.

The Bards and Druids pulled away like a spring.

Clerics buffed the defense of the tanks.

They handled the second strike much better.

The incoming storm after they started counting time was over, there were no casualties.

The hit points of many players fell drastically, but they were on the mend with the support of the healing team.

They made it through the 1st phase, they could handle the attack of the enemy.

William sneered with a violent look.

No. The raid boss covered with blade like armor definitely had more attacks up his sleeves. And he had not even shifted into alternate modes yet.

(But things aren't too bad,) William thought as he shot his arrows.

Before William realized, the words had escaped from his throat and he roared, "Up the DPS! We can't win this if we hold back, weaken him!"

Huge amounts of arrows flew out.

Swords clashed, threatening to dissolve the formation. Flaming spells danced and surrounded Ruseato.

William understood. All boss monsters had an incredible amount of hit points. Just the number alone was enough to turn players off. For a first class raiding guild like Silver Sword, the level 94 Guardian Dinkuron had a base hit points of 18,000. The raid boss had one or ten thousand times that amount of health.

If you viewed the hit points of '7th of the garden' Ruseato in the form of a health bar, you could see how slow the attacks were grinding his health down. It was hard to even see the damage done when you looked at the health bar. Even so, piling up all this minute damage was the only way to take him down.

"Look out below you!"

The shrill voice came from the bandit Federico.

'7th of the garden' Ruseato suddenly slowed his movements and a black mist and ooze seeped out from his feet. Its wriggling movement covered the entire floor of the arena in a hurry.

"It deals damage, attribute is poison! It hinders action, correction, hinders movement! Attack speed and power are diminished!"

Dinkuron reported his findings. At his feet was the black ooze with weak flickering lightning as it entangled Dinkuron's metal boots.

William hesitated for a moment.

It caused damage, but it was very slight.

The damage hit against the protection barrier causing sparks to fly, but was weak as it didn't break through. Melee members with weaker defense than Dinkuron did not suffer much damage, meaning the damage was low.

The damage was insignificant and hindered movement... As William's sense of danger tingled, '7th of the garden' Ruseato started to move with heavy steps.

Dinkuron used Anchor Howl to stop him, but the effect was nullified. The armor of Ruseato had a new nullify skills effect.

Wide area movement hindering effect with low damage.

When William realized its intent, he roared.

"Mass buff defense! Mass healing!"

This roar was like pressing a button, the team reacted on command.

Translucent hemispherical barriers, the dim glow of defense spell, the orange light of reactive heal, all of that was blown away with one stroke. The metallic armored body of '7th of the garden' Ruseato was like a weapon itself. The towering machine leaped with the agility of a cat. The halberd swung close to the ground mowing through the members of Silver Sword.

But despite that.

More than half of the group survived.

The fearless sound of counting continued, ignoring the pain.

"Healers of the 1st hold down the front line! 2nd party retreat to recuperate! 3rd and 4th lower output to 70%, prioritize resuscitation!"

William smiled, unable to hold back his joy.

He could smell the blood dripping from his nose.

The taste of iron in the blood that was the raid William was after.

The enemy was strong, beyond his expectations.

But William and his crew were still alive.

The battle was just beginning.

Part 4

Demiqa's leapt back 10m, exhaling the burning air from his lungs. He recovered his health slowly through his passive skill Resilience.

The fight had fallen into a stalemate.

He grit his teeth as though he wanted to shatter them as he glared at the enemy.

Facing the '7th of the garden' Ruseato in dull purple armor, they had to endure his abuse and keep on wearing him down. The information on this was correct and the fight was going well. The melee warriors including Demiqa's struck at Ruseato's sturdy armor countless times, making deep marks on the armor.

These scars were like branches of a tree, covering Ruseato's whole body. Suddenly, he started to shed, breaking out of his old shell like a hardboiled egg.

A Ruseato as white as a hospital's ceiling emerged from within.

The armor that dropped from his bleached body merged with the shadow at his feet, forming into shadow warriors. These black, slender and featureless monsters wielded giant battle scythes. They seemed 2 dimensional like pieces of paper because of their dark appearance.

Demiqa's dodged white Ruseato's beam.

A weak casual attack unlike the fierce strike from before.

Demiqa's was ready to strike after recovering his hit points.

Silver Sword members grabbed this chance to move in and attack in waves, but were intercepted by the shadow warriors. Their range and attack power were much weaker when compared with Ruseato's, but they made that up with numbers. A dozen of them had formed right now.

The group dodged Ruseato's careless attacks while destroying the shadow warriors.

Even the main tank Dinkuron was unable to taunt this number of enemies. Including Naotsugu who he couldn't get along with, they would need 5 tanks to aggravate the enemies and keep them off the rest of the group.

The shadow warriors pushed forward like bugs attracted by the sweet scent of honey.

Demiqas locked on to these monsters with Wyvern Kick.

Demiqas used his special skill Absolute Geheimnis, a gliding kick allowing him to target any enemy in a 150 degree arc before him. By using this skill, he could charge into the midst of the enemy in one move. This was not advisable in normal conditions, as it was difficult to dodge the attacks of a strong raid boss like Ruseato. It also left the healers behind him in a dangerous situation. But the shadows before him were raid monsters, not the raid boss. Enemies with such large and unwieldy weapons were a piece of cake for Monks like Demiqaas.

Demiqas transformed into a green meteor with a crackling sound.

Demiqas looked like he was navigating the air on a skateboard as he burst through the chest of a shadow warrior with his Tiger Echo Fist.

The raid mobs attacked with their scythes in retaliation. Demiqaas parried away the strikes with a backhand, pulled his knee to his chest and launched a shadowless kick.

The enemies explode like a watermelon falling to the ground.

But with every shadow warrior that fell, Ruseato would absorb their darkness and recover a bit of health.

They were going back to square one.

The white Ruseato could heal itself.

The catalyst was the shadow warriors, existing just to buy time. The white Ruseato would be able to recover enough health after some time and start attacking again. Its armor would then be dyed black and it would launch powerful attacks repeatedly.

The group could endure the torrent of attacks if it were just Ruseato alone. If the shadow warriors teamed up with black Ruseato, the tanks would fall under the shadow warriors' scythes after black Ruseato's powerful strikes.

The health of the group was supplied by the healers. Be it the protection barrier of Kannagi or the reactive heal of the Cleric, there was a limit to what they could do.

Fighting '7th of the garden' Ruseato alone had already pushed them to the limit.

They couldn't let the mobs live. But killing them would restore the health of white Ruseato. Before they knew it, there were twenty odd shadow warriors, the raid had been pushed to the brink of failure.

Shiroe was the one who broke the stalemate. It irked Demiqaas.

... The number of people who damaged black Ruseato was equivalent to the number of shadow warriors.

This discovery allowed Silver Sword to pull themselves together.

Leaving the task of attacking to the powerful players, healers and supporting members stopped their damage output. This way, they could limit the number of shadow warriors that would form to a dozen when Ruseato activated white mode.

The coward Shiroe who was directing from behind was an unforgivable target of vengeance for Demiqaas. Both Demiqaas' pride and his guild Brigandia were shattered by him. If those 3 didn't come to Susukino, Demiqaas would have adapted to this world slowly.

That werecat Swashbuckler can be forgiven. That swordsman waved his rapier in front of Demiqaas. But that coward didn't even look Demiqaas in the eye the whole time.

Shiroe acted as if he didn't remember Demiqaas' name.

Demiqaas still remembered Shiroe's expression back in Susukino. That man showed no signs of worry when he saw Demiqaas. Fine. Shiroe was strong, he could tell from this raid. Then at least mock Demiqaas a little, even a look of disdain would be fine too.

But that Enchanter only wore the expression of 'don't trouble me'.

Demiqa's vented his anger on the shadow warriors.

He punched through a warrior with Lightning Straight.

After dodging with Phantom Step, he used Aerial Rave to launch his foe into the air. He attacked its flank with a Wyvern Kick, and followed up the air combo with another Wyvern Kick.

That was the extent Shiroe cared about Demiqa's.

Demiqa would not rest unless he killed Shiroe, his fiery anger burned in his lungs. He swore to torment Shiroe one day and make him regret being born into this world.

But now was not the time.

It was regrettable, but his capability was limited. At this point in time, Demiqa had to acknowledge that Shiroe was very strong. Not just equipment, his skills were better than Demiqa's too.

When Demiqa took part in this raid, he wanted to backstab Shiroe in the beginning. The training substitute for this was the monsters he was massacring. He just wanted to uplift his spirit. His body felt lighter than before. Demiqa's fist decimated the monsters, tearing through all the shadow warriors.

Just when Demiqa thought he had gotten use to the pace of the raid, he noticed a symbol of a dagger circling around his wrist. This unfamiliar dagger was Shiroe's Keen Edge... He realized things were different from what he imagined. He was fighting at such a high level because of the buffing spell of that man. He knew that this would help him by chaining faster and increasing the attack power.

Just like what he was experiencing now.

A shadow warrior drew near and raised its battle scythe high.

There was still half a second of rigidity time left for using Wyvern Kick. Demiqa should have taken the blow directly, but that didn't happen.

He might fail to notice sometimes, but Shiroe had cast spells to assist him ever since they entered the zone. This spell seemed to be called Mind Shock. A magic that used a shock wave to stun the enemy and blur their senses. Leaving normal monsters aside, it would be a great help if it could stun the raid mob for even a second. One second was plenty for Demiqa, leaping out of the monster's attack range with Monkey Step and counter attacking with a Dragon Tail Swing roundhouse kick.

Demiqa going all out to decimate the enemy was within Shiroe's calculations.

Demiqa dropping out of formation and his roundhouse kick, all this valiant effort was done under the watchful eyes of Shiroe.

This man did not have the power and skill of Demiqa's.

What he could do was to mislead the enemy and cast buffing spells. Such dependence on deception would not work on powerful foes.

More importantly, Shiroe could preempt what Demiqa wanted to do and provide support without Demiqa even noticing. Shiroe could see right through Demiqa's intentions. In a way, Demiqa had also grown if he managed to understand to this extent.

(I will kill you one day.)

(I will do it before everyone.)

(I will smack you till your face is black and blue, you will regret this and spend the rest of your life in tears.)

(First, I will obtain phantasmal gear in this raid...)

(Grind my level, refine my techniques...)

Demiqa leapt through the battlefield taking out one enemy after another.

His class Monk had short cool down time and had powerful attacks. His attack power couldn't match that of weapon specialist classes, but his hit points and abnormal status resistance were top notch. That's how he managed to roam among the enemies and survive the onslaught of the raid boss, all the while dishing out damage of his own. Demiqas was fired up, using his body to strike, kick, parry and attack with all the skills he had.

The battle was progressing slowly.

Even when the enemy gained the upper hand, William would reorganize the team successfully with his fiery will. Maintain the front lines with tanks and healers, keeping the enemy debuffed. If he could bring out the full potential of this formation, they wouldn't be wiped out so easily. If they could keep this up, fend off the shadow warriors and grind off Ruseato's health, they would be able to pull it off.

But this would take a while, with many judgment calls they had to make. The decisions required calm and focus, and needed to be made fast with little room for error. Raids were a combination of all these actions.

Demiqa was heat.

Demiqa was fire.

Concentrating on dodging the attacks in front of him, breakthrough and eliminate them. He moved in on black Ruseato, trying to shattering its armor with thunder like punches.

His mind slowly became empty, immersing himself in the heat of battle. Compared to his days in the corrupted Susukino and his fight with Nyanta, Demiqas was able to focus on the battle without distraction.

But he didn't notice the situation had changed until he heard the scream from behind.

You couldn't blame Demiqas for being caught off guard. Even the veteran raid members were surprised by this attack. The iron gates on the east and west side of the arena were fully open. In the darkness beyond, the bearded frost giant with white pupil, '4th of the garden' Tarutauruga and the fiery serpent, '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura loomed.

They entered the arena, bringing a whirlwind of frost and fire with them. Their target was the 4th party that was concentrating on Ruseato. The 4th party was wiped out in a blink of an eye, the splash damage from the attacks severely hurting the other parties.

Demiqa could taste the bile coming from his stomach after watching this ridiculous scene.

This was too much.

Demiqa was fighting '7th of the garden' Ruseato right now.

He thought they should be taking them on one at a time.

They had to take care of Ruseato's minions in this raid battle, making this an even fight. The balance could be destroyed by just adding one or two more monsters to the mix, enough to wipe out Demiqas' group.

They were just getting the hang of it, even though their chance of victory was akin to walking on thin ice.

But now there were two more raid bosses on the same level as '7th of the garden' Ruseato.

Demiqa knew the truth.

They couldn't win this.

The problem was not with tactics or strategy.

There was an overwhelming difference in fighting power, dismissing all their delicate preparation and hard work. If they had to take on 3 raid bosses, they would need a 96 people Legion Raid army instead of a 24 people Full Raid force.

He remembered the emotionless voice speaking from the depth of his ear that said this before.

'... This world is no longer a game. The game has ended. Your time has ended.'

Just like Adventurers adjusting their strategy for the raids, the monsters could also abandon their position and muster their numbers... That's what Demiqas thought.

If Demiqas were the guardian of the dungeon, the first thing he will consider was such a strategy.

Working together to destroy the Adventurers.

This was common sense, and it had happened.

In this arena with cruelty and despair frozen in, Demiqas could hear an inhuman shriek.

A face the size of a billboard you saw in cinemas approached. The frost giant leaned in as if he were falling and slammed his fist into the raid group. With a splatter, a Summoner turned into a stain on the arena floor.

Demiqa could no longer hear the counting that calmed his mind.

Demiqa charged in like a tornado with a roar, knocking the surprised Shiroe flying. After 3 or 4 somersaults, Shiroe was caught by Naotsugu in mid-air, out of the attack range of the frost giant's club.

Look at how pitiful you are, coward. Demiqas mocked Shiroe.

Although his left leg was crushed because of this, it was worth it since he got to see Shiroe's dumbfounded look.

'See if you can kill me, you bunch of cheating raid bosses,' Demiqas spat onto the floor.

But both Demiqas and Shiroe were unable to escape from the hail of fire cast by '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura. Not just them, but also Naotsugu, William and Tetora. It was the same with the veteran warriors of Silver Sword who were stronger than Demiqas, who were able to stampede through countless raids as if they were killing bugs.

All the moisture was vaporized in an instant, the flames clearing all sense of pain. The 24 man raid group was wiped out.

Part 5

Krusty exited from the goblin hut that smelled so bad that his nose was bent. Even the renowned strong man of the guild was unable to bear the odor of the goblins.

His lieutenant Takayama started to feel light headed when they made it half way through.

Compared to the hut piled with dirty hay and filth, even standing under the freezing winter sky was a hundred times better. Adventurers had strong resistance to changes in temperature anyway.

It was the same with Krusty.

He relaxed his shoulders and left the goblin's lodging, there was nothing for him there.

All the huts were all the same. A shallow pit was dug in the ground, a pillar was erected and the roof and walls were made from branches and grass. There were several such primitive huts arranged in rows for each settlement. This was one such hut in the Silver Rack Mountain. There were countless settlements in the mountains, with about 50 huts each, housing about 300 goblins.

Most of these settlements were like empty shells.

Krusty's army took out 30% of the goblins.

The 70% balance were probably gathered at the Citadel of Seven Falls ruled by the goblin king.

It had been a month since the campaign began.

While Takayama Misa and the army marched through the area, they would scout out the surrounding zones and verify the locations of the goblin settlements. They would then plan their attack according to the intelligence they gathered, the campaign was progressing slowly.

In the beginning, the consensus of the Round Table was that raiding the Citadel of Seven Falls could be easily done. But the goblins in Eastal had been reproducing and bolstering their numbers with the start of the Catastrophe, growing to a colossal scale. This was a crisis comparable to a nightmare for the People of the Land.

On the other hand, these goblins were not a threat for the Adventurers of Akiba, at least for the level 90 players in battle guilds. There was a raid quest that needed to be completed within the Citadel of Seven Falls, which Krusty was confident of finishing in 2 days with a select group of Adventurers. Takayama agreed with his assessment.

The goal this time was not to defeat the goblin king.

The mission was to ensure the safety of the People of the Land living in the north eastern region. The root of the problem lay with the tens of thousands goblins roaming the area. Even if they could take out the goblin king successfully, they would still fail if the leaderless goblins spilled out from Silver Rack Mountain.

The staff officers of the command unit Krusty and Takayama had deliberately slowed their pace while traveling through the region akin to a hunting trip. Dozens of Adventurer groups were patrolling Silver Rack Mountain, doing reconnaissance and small scale battles.

They were herding them like fish into a net, using this battle plan to chase all the goblins in the region into the Citadel of Seven Falls. For the goblins, they were mustering their forces to counterattack. But for Takayama's group, this was just a part of the plan.

Takayama headed into the valley with a ready water source by Krusty's orders.

The other members were investigating the area around the settlement. From the looks of things, it was unlikely to find any goblins left behind. They were relaxed as this was just a routine check.

Krusty and Takayama bashed through the foliage as they followed a trail they found.

This path was probably used by the goblins to retrieve water. But the goblins were only 140cm in height, so it was hard for the 2 of them who were taller to make their way through.

After making their way to the river, they squinted their eyes because of a gust of wind. The cool wind seemed to sweep away any air of doubt. Takayama liked it, but Krusty seemed to be unmoved.

Although she felt it when the Libra Festival ended, but Krusty seemed to be getting more moody. Riese might bite her handkerchief and worry about him, but Takayama has been ignoring it. Krusty was a grown man, he would probably feel annoyed if a woman were to worry about him, that's what Takayama thought.

(No, it has nothing to do with being an adult or a child. Boys are delicate no matter their age.)

Takayama used her work experience as a gauge.

Takayama had worked with Krusty for a very long time. She could guess what the things he was worried about were. An approximate idea. Taking the chance while they were out scouting, she chatted with him a bit.

"Milord?"

"Hmm? What's the matter officer Takayama?"

Krusty reacted slowly as he looked at Takayama with thoughtful eyes.

"You seemed troubled recently. What's on your mind?"

"Hmm."

Krusty hid his mouth behind his fingers, deep in thought. Unlike the heavy gauntlets he normally wore, he had put on leather gloves today. The armor he was wearing matched his muscular body well. A guild master that looked great. There were plenty of people who were fooled by his appearance, but this made operations easy to run. With this in mind, Takayama probed further.

"Are you bored?"

Krusty gave Takayama a shifty look. He considered it for a moment, cleared away his dignified expression and smiled wryly, lifting his arms in surrender.

"That's it. I'm bored."

"Please bear with it."

"I have been enduring it every day."

Takayama sighed.

It was just a wild guess but she was right.

Krusty had an intellectual look and took logical actions. He had the capability to manage people and the charisma to match. Operating the largest battle guild in the Yamato server was a real result he could be proud of. With 1700 members, his guild was beyond the size of a small or medium enterprise in the real world.

But Krusty was not as perfect as he looked.

The young man who oversaw all sort of issues in the Round Table Council was mischievous and bored easily.

This was only known to a few pioneer core members, but the reason why Krusty founded such a large organization was because 'I just want to see what will happen if I succeed in doing it.' It was not meant to be a guild in the beginning. It was a talent network which happened to be an important element when creating a guild.

Krusty did it on a whim one day.

... This game Elder Tales was fun. But to enjoy the game, he would need to have a large number of comrades he could have fun adventuring with. The game developers knew this and had made similar statements. They included all sorts of systems for the players to find companions to play with. But what if the players come up with a better talent management system, and use it to dominate end game contents, wouldn't that be interesting?

That was why D.D.D was founded.

It was fine even if it were not a guild. He used the guild as a template because it was convenient. When Elder Tales was just a game, the guild activities were communicated through voice chat and an official website. This system was proposed by Krusty. Periodical management meetings and the system of assigning manpower for raids were done the same way.

Krusty was interested in delegating command, letting 'each department plan their own activities to achieve results', and was intrigued by such self-sufficient groups. Hence, even though the guild was very large, it remained flexible without bureaucratic red tapes.

This continued after the Catastrophe too. With the formation of the Round Table Council, Krusty used the chance to push the departments to be more autonomous. As a result, he fulfilled his curiosity of creating a self-sustaining guild, but his offhand approach meant that Krusty was getting less involved with the guild as well.

Simply said, he had too much free time.

Takayama understood the temper of her friend, this was troubling indeed. Even though Krusty was talented, it was difficult to spend time with him because he was too capable. His excess abilities caused unexpected troubles and chaos around him, for better or for worse.

It was a pain to handle a bored Krusty.

He was not a lawless criminal and in the end, he usually did more good than bad. But the chaos he caused in the process gave headaches to Takayama and the others. Takayama thought that he could restrain his 'boredom' after finding Raynesia, but she seemed to have overestimated that young lady.

(Forcing this issue onto the princess is unreasonable anyway...)

When she thought about it, she felt apologetic towards Raynesia.

(I have to think of a topic,) she thought as she caught up with Krusty who was wandering aimlessly by the river. He bent down and meddled with some pebbles.

"Found something?"

"Not really..."

Krusty adjusted his glasses which moved when he leaned forward, inspecting a pebble before his eyes. This was probably the tip of a broken spear.

The river meandered further downstream, there were stones bigger than the fists of a child in the depths of the water. There was snow around the area, but this might be a great and refreshing place for a BBQ in the summer.

Krusty kicked some pebbles and seemed to be on to something.

"This place appears to be a training area."

"Training. This area seems to be well tended."

Takayama replied.

At a glance, she could see the signs of stones being moved to the edge of the trees. If she looked closer, she could find remnants of weapons between the rocks and trees. This place had been used for quite a period of time.

She had never thought that the goblins would conduct training, but this was normal if they wanted to start a war. But even so, she didn't think this would help them much. The levels of the goblins were much lower than the Adventurers.

As Takayama thought about it, she noticed Krusty's gaze. She thought about it seriously for a moment and got it in an instant.

The goblins were training their strategy and tactics.

They had not considered this possibility before. Just like Takayama's group plotted different approaches to raid the Citadel of Seven Falls, the goblins were also preparing for battle in different ways. This world was not Elder Tales anymore. Takayama cursed her own incompetence for not noticing this earlier.

"Milord, let's head back and break the news to the others."

"We need to send scouts to search the surroundings for training grounds and their effects."

"That's right."

The two of them headed back towards the settlement after a short conversation. They needed to meet up with Kugel and Richou's scout party first. Next would be heading back to headquarters and giving the necessary orders.

It was already too late when Takayama noticed her Scythe vibrating gently. It made a metallic sound in an instant and glowed red hot.

The recent performance of the weapon was strange.

It did not become weaker. Takayama felt that it had become stronger instead, so she didn't send it for repairs. But sometimes it would vibrate during battles, and heat up for no reason.

Takayama looked confused as she drew out her weapon to inspect it. This action was done automatically without much thought

But Takayama felt a truck had run over her hand, so strong that she was certain the bones in her arm were crushed. Takayama's eyes opened wide, seeing a dark red sphere enveloping Krusty who had snatch the weapon away from her.

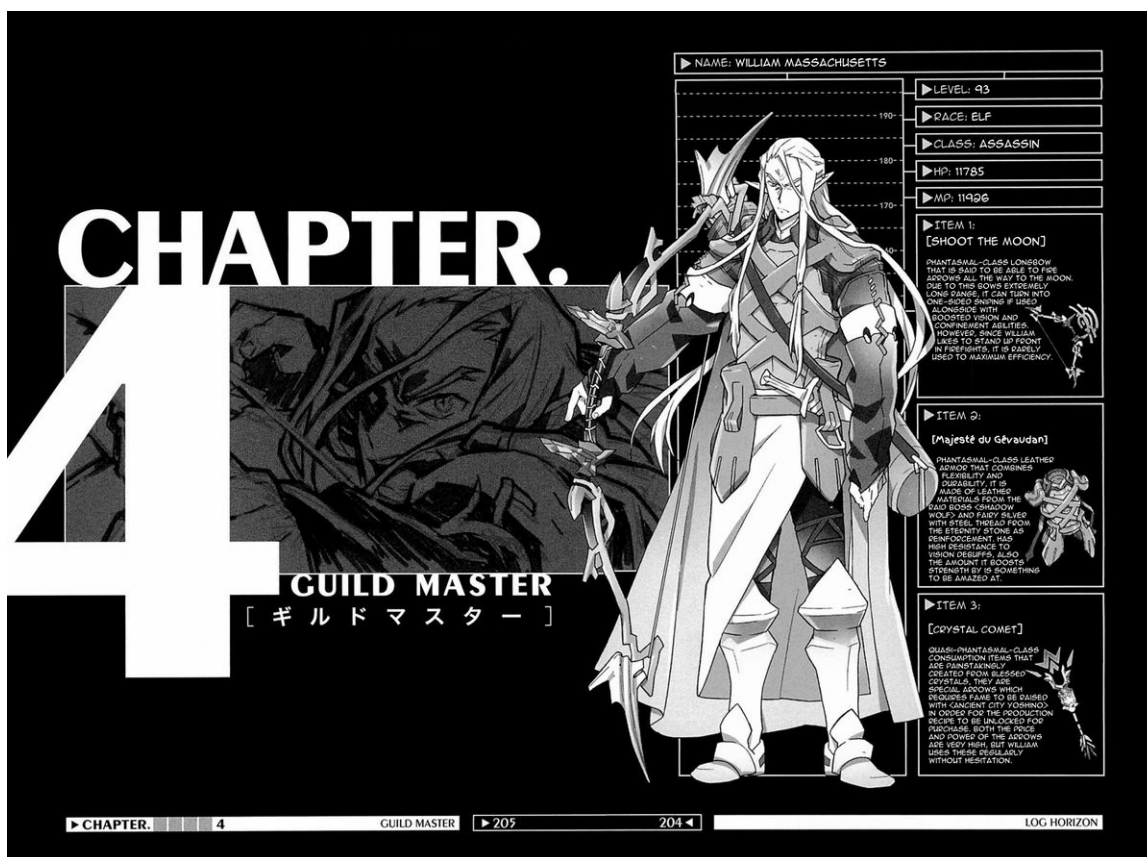
The weapon emitted a red glow, a bizarre force field was sucking everything into its twisted core.

The bored D.D.D guild master was in the center of the sphere.

Krusty pushed Takayama away with his other hand, but Takayama didn't remember asking him to do that, reaching out desperately for Krusty. She pushed her right hand into the twisted space.

But with a sharp crack, Takayama was left alone in the silent night.

Takayama's right hand, her old friend Krusty, and the Scythe named 'Calamity' were gone.



Chapter 4: Guild Master

Part 1

This appeared to be a street on a late night.

But the surroundings were bright, the street lights casting a long shadow of him on the ground.

Shiroe thought it was late at night because the shutters of the shops were closed and there was no one around. It was unbelievably quiet.

After passing through a McDonalds and a mobile shop, he lowered his gaze as he went by a floral shop's sign board. These were scenes he had grown tired of. There was no sign of people in this silent street.

Shiroe was walking on a street that was an hour away from Ikebukuro by train. According to the locals, it was near a station that was forcibly included into the Tokyo subway line. Stations with similar names with prefix 'north' and 'south' can be found around the area, a sign that this was a suburban satellite town.

Shiroe was born and raised here.

But this city built on lies was a stranger in Shiroe's eyes.

The population in this new city was vast.

It was full of facilities meant to bring convenience to the residents.

But the distance from the inner city was awkward. For example, the citizens would make their way to the inner city for electric appliances, clothing and entertainment, so there were no shops worth mentioning here. That was the sort of place this was. It was convenient and had everything. But when you really wanted to find something, you couldn't.

It could not be viewed as a mini city, it was akin to a supplementary space for Tokyo, a place without its own heart.

Shiroe's parents moved to this town after marriage. A two story house that wasn't too big or small, with plenty of other similar buildings in the area. Be it the residence, station, the leftover farmland or the trees, they were all

unmemorable and ordinary sceneries that could be seen all over Japan and were fading slowly.

There was nothing worth protecting in this town without its own heart, so it changed slowly over time. Even the people that frequented the station building, shopping mall and the shops changed periodically. The residents also changed at a high rate.

This also reflected in Shiroe's circle of friends. Shiroe felt that it was a waste for one third of the elementary school classroom to be empty. They planned for this amount of students. Shiroe didn't know if this was the effect of the aging population or the city planning estimate being way off. From elementary to middle school to high school, his classmates were ever changing. Looking back, this could be viewed as the metabolism of this new town. The young Shiroe felt that the world was blurry and untrustworthy, and that people or things going missing was nothing abnormal.

(Speaking of which...)

He raised his head as he recalled something.

There was a small place called Brinjal Curry around here. The candy house, wallet shop and fruit store were right beside it. That was a place he frequented with his friends when he was in high school, a cheap and memorable place.

The signboard that had a dubious drawing of an Indian was gone.

Shiroe was puzzled for a moment, but remembered with a hint of loneliness.

He carelessly forgot that the Indian curry house closed down. It was replaced by a beef bowl cafe for a few months and then taken over by a ramen franchise with a flashy signboard. Shiroe remembered seeing that when he went home during college vacation.

He went into the ramen restaurant once, and would not want to taste the disgusting food ever again.

Even though they went out of business, Shiroe still wanted to try the taste of the curry house one more time. The owner was an Islamic person speaking with a Yokohama accent, and did not look like an Indian. The curry was Japanese flavor instead of Indian style (it tasted like Vermont instant curry). It was priced reasonably and came with a large serving of eggplants, not a bad place to eat once in a while.

(It's a pity it closed down.)

He sighed as he lifted his head to look at the shop, the flashy signboard of the ramen franchise restaurant with black and red wordings. Shiroe stopped and observed the shop carefully. On the roller shutter was a sign saying they were closed on Wednesday. The restaurant was usually decorated with lots of flags, but it was quiet now. He could not make out what the sign above the shop was saying, it was all a blur to him.

Shiroe scratched his cheeks and came to a conclusion.

(So this is what it means to lose your memories.)

Shiroe had forgotten what this ramen franchise was called.

"So that's how it is."

It was not too surprising.

He already expected this, and he didn't feel like it was a major loss. Memories were fragile, disappearing like the items inside a treasure chest with a broken lock.

He remembered the scene of Silver Sword failing in their challenge.

He understood the risk of dying in a raid. Normally, raids needed to be challenged multiple times to accumulate experience, recalibrating their strategy in order to emerge victorious. Unlike the fight against the Sahuagins and goblins, the opponents were around his level, so failure was within expectations.

Shiroe felt a troubling sense of loneliness.

This faint emotion was nostalgic.

It filled the life of the young Shirogane Kei.

It was the same for elementary school, middle school and after.

Before he realized it, Shiroe was holding on to these feelings as he took a night stroll.

He had lived in this town from birth till high school but he could only read 20% of the signboards clearly.

The ever renewing population came into brief contact with Shiroe before disappearing. But from their perspective, Shiroe was the one who disappeared. A meeting so brief they barely left any trace. The trace would then disappear from their minds completely.

By thinking rationally, it was Shiroe who forgot, while the shops were the ones being forgotten.

But Shiroe couldn't help but feel a tinge of sadness as if he were betrayed.

Shiroe felt ashamed as he looked for an excuse.

His classmates from elementary and middle school had definitely forgotten about him.

He didn't mesh well with his classmates due to missing classes. Since he spent his time in the library till the evening, it was only natural for them to not remember him. Even Shiroe could not recall his old classmates. This situation overlapped with his memory of the shops, making him feel remorse.

Shiroe felt a wave of willful anger wash over him.

His hometown seemed to have everything, but it left no trace in Shiroe's heart.

Shiroe walked along the silent street illuminated by the mercury lights.

He just noticed he had left the downtown area and crossed the abnormally deserted bridge. Shiroe strolled down the street leading to the elementary school which was lined with trees.

A shadow which was supposed to be a friend rose from the ground, Shiroe didn't feel anything out of place when the petite figure walked beside him. The two of them passed by the green Gingko tree and the bench in front of the bus stop and continued walking under the night sky.

Shiroe was the only one moving in the streets, but he could hear the distant sound of heavy vehicles driving by. With the growl of the wind in the background, Shiroe walked on with his eyes on his feet.

Passing through a big park, Shiroe followed the meandering path aimlessly. The park was lit by the soft glowing lights. As expected, there was no one here.

Tiles with drawings of fish covered the bottom of the manmade pond. It was made shallow and wide to accommodate the children playing in them. The light reflecting off the water surface made Shiroe turn away. Shiroe and the shadow sat on a bench overlooking the manmade pond.

Shiroe concluded that this was a near death experience.

He died during his raid with Silver Sword.

According to the laws of this alternate world, he would revive at the entrance of the raid zone. During the lag time before he respawned, Shiroe who just went through the bizarre experience of death was watching a dream.

He leaned back on the bench and looked into the sky.

There were no stars in sight.

(So I ended up here in the end.)

Shiroe let out a lonely laugh.

Shiroe had spent countless nights on this bench. He grew up in a dual income family and would scowl impatiently when social workers asked why he was alone in the park. He was a regular here.

He didn't really like anything here. He just had no other place to go. There was just him alone in the house. The feeling of discomfort washed over him even if he hid under his blanket. He was also afraid of the young men and women dressed fancifully in the downtown area. In order to forget this unpleasant feeling, the grade-schooler Shiroe made his way through the streets at night to idle on this bench. That was the only way.

Although he didn't suppress his chest with his eyes shut like he did as a grade-schooler, the faint wound brought a silent certainty to Shiroe. He was certain that he had failed.

Shiroe frequented here often in the past.

The adults commented that the young Shiroe was matured, smart and exercised self-restraint. That was why children about his age seemed irrational and barbaric to Shiroe, creating a gulf with other kids. As a result, plenty of unhappy things happened.

He squandered his classmates' good intentions.

Heartlessly slapping away the hand they offered him in good will.

He looked down on the kindness they showed.

He ran away from fights he should have stood up for.

He failed to comprehend the feelings and hardship of his parents.

All these were delicate irreversible failures.

The young Shiroe cried on this bench after every failure, promising himself to do this and that. Sometimes he completed the task wonderfully and thought things were going well. But as expected it was a failure, holding on to the feeling of being defective as he sat on the bench.

'... Just die and you will understand. The incompetence, the bad side and the ugliness of yourself. Die a hundred times and you will understand a hundred times. They can't go on because it is too hard to face them.'

He recalled William's words.

He now knew why people gave up raiding.

Compared to losing his memories, a pain that felt more compelling and unbearable.

Shiroe was familiar with this feeling and the meaning behind it.

If he would teleport here every time he died, that meant the city on earth Shiroe grew up in had died before.

If this was what death meant, Shiroe had gone through it countless times.

That night when he threw away an important notebook, or that evening when he slapped away the hand his friend offered him. The night when he was made to say, "Be careful" with a fake smile, and the time when he bid farewell to the library.

Death was the feeling of wanting to die.

Even though it had faded, Shiroe knew it very well.

It was the feeling he bore in his chest. Not just defeat, but the reopening of the wounds of previous failures as well. Hadn't he tasted this many times? He had gone through this enough times to not want to do this again. But before he knew it, he ended up here again. He had lived over dozen of years, will he ever get away from this bench? His doubt stuck to his back like a shadow.

His future seemed so far away.

After a dozen years, the amount of time was still beyond Shiroe's comprehension. In this indefinite amount of time that he lived, would he keep on repeating his mistakes?

He remembered Demiqas who grit his teeth and knocked Shiroe away.

Shiroe didn't understand why he did that.

Shiroe didn't recall doing anything that would prompt Demiqas to help him.

William offered his help after saying "Alright, no problem."

Shiroe could not comprehend why that young man would lend Shiroe his hand.

In Shiroe's mind the only thing he did was made William lose face.

He didn't know all sorts of things. He hated his foolish self.

The same with Naotsugu. Shiroe came all this way while holding back information from his friends.

Shiroe was not wary of Minami. Shiroe was not guarding against Minami's spy. He was already aware of the spy's identity.

Shiroe remained vigilant about an unknown third party.

He unclenched the fist he balled up unconsciously.

Other than Adventurers and People of the Land, perhaps there was something else out there. He suspected it to be the Kunie clan, but it was not them. But this 'something' definitely existed.

Like ReGan said, Shiroe and the others were summoned to this alternate world by a global level spell. It was just a coincidence that the game and this world were so similar. But was that really possible? Although the chances were not zero, there should be a better explanation out there.

Shiroe recalled that the research and development of technology that could read brain waves was ongoing. They were attempting to use brain waves to input commands or perform simple communication with patients in a vegetative state. According to the latest reports, they were able to view a person's dream via video. The research was mainly conducted in the medical field, and would probably move towards entertainment and space exploration by the next decade. It was great news that caused quite a stir online.

But the research had not advanced to the practical application stage yet. Maybe a secret international organization was researching in secret, experimenting with inducing a game like virtual world among its subjects.

But it was something else for tens of thousands of Japanese to experience this, that's just stupid. Also, Shiroe and the rest were not wearing any special equipment.

There must be a better explanation for this.

Shiroe endured the sick apprehension that something was wrong for the past few months. This feeling was heightened when he heard about the Spirit Theory from ReGan. Building on the basis of the concept, he violently probed into the darkness with his imagination and thinking.

Shiroe used the convenience of the Round Table to request all sorts of research.

Roderick came up with the possibility of flavor text becoming reality. Soujirou found out about the changes in the ecology of monsters. Michitaka investigated the flourishing vegetation in the south. Charasin surveyed and collated information of rumors in the League of Freedom Cities Eastal.

The investigations revealed heaps of evidence that a third party existed. This strengthened Shiroe's suspicion. Something coincidental that they 'just happened to think of' was also evidence of the third party's activity.

(But I can't use those things as an excuse. I was taking it too easy. I stopped searching, bounded by fear.)

There was so much more that Demiqas could do. The same with William.

He should have confided with Naotsugu. And Nyanta too.

Shiroe's worry had brought so much trouble to the people around him. He knew all that, but wasted the chance because of his lack of effort.

People important to Shiroe must be waiting for Shiroe there. The wind blowing tonight was like an invitation for Shiroe to return back to his guild.

They were living proof that Shiroe was cowardly and lazy, and pushed others away.

Shiroe stood up, determined to return to the others.

He would be letting everyone down if he couldn't even do that.

And he owed Kinjo an apology.

Shiroe was suspicious and did not say his piece.

What a pity. He should have shared everything. For the sake of the future Shiroe believed in, he had to convince Kinjo. As a fellow human being living in this world, they should discuss the pressing issues together.

Although he had no basis, Shiroe felt something staring at him. And that something had always been there since the Catastrophe happened.

Shiroe who stood up on reflex heard a familiar voice for a moment.

A whisper hinting on an upcoming meeting.

Part 2

Shiroe felt a brief moment of vertigo and found himself on a white sandy beach.

The sunlight reflected off the clear ocean.

The waves rolled in slowly, making faint sounds as they washed to the shore, leaving foam in their wake.

The ocean met the sky at the horizon and extended as far as the eyes could see.

Shiroe was surprised by the crunching sound he made when he took a step.

He started to walk along the pure white shoreline, looking at the flawless beach in awe.

He couldn't do anything by staying here, something seemed to be guiding him on.

Shiroe lifted his head as the wind blew on his face. A shadow loomed from behind and took to the sky.

What kind of seabird had such beautiful wings?

The bird frolicked with its mates in the dark blue sky.

Looking at them gliding in the air, Shiroe was reminded of a novel by Richard Bach. The birds flew like seagulls, flapping their wings wherever they went.

(Speaking of which, what an amazing place this is...)

He had no impression of this even though this was a near death experience.

Did he come here when he was young, he wondered. He read somewhere that humans who had forgotten about things had simply lost their means to recall these memories. These memories were encrypted into the nerve cells and synapses of the brain so they couldn't simply be retrieved unless the human could break the encryption. Shiroe thought about complicated matters, but he still couldn't remember this place.

But, even though he had no memory of ever coming, it was still a beautiful place.

The clear winter skies and the sand dunes which extended all the way into the air.

The cream colored beach formed a perfect contrast with the aquamarine ocean.

Shiroe walked along the shoreline alone.

The footprints he left in the white sand looked like they could have been left behind millions of years ago. They were a record that followed Shiroe's path.

Maybe he had left it behind at the park bench, or it was simply swept away by the silvery sand under his feet, but Shiroe's sense of helplessness no longer lingered in his chest.

Only a faint sense of guilt still remained. It's a debt he knew he had to return after he respawned.

Shiroe walked for a long time, looking out into the ocean as he organized his thoughts. Light rippled in the sand with every step he took.

A clear crystal sound raised Shiroe's doubts.

The heavenly body that illuminated the beach was a sphere of blue covered with clouds, something he had only seen in photographs. He thought it was the moon at first, but it was bright enough to light up the sky, a blue planet.

(... Is this the moon?)

As he looked around him, this appeared to be the correct answer.

The sand dunes that were like parched dragon bones and the turquoise lights surrounding him. This was a scene out of a fantasy.

Shiroe checked the name of the server hastily and was convinced this was the rumored 14th server.

The name of the server was Mare Tranquillitas.

It was not registered on the auto translation system. Taking the original text into consideration, this place should be called Sea of Tranquility.

This was probably the test server of the Ataravu Corporation which was filled with content that was in the midst of development. He chanced upon this place because of the Catastrophe, but Shiroe was not sure if there were other ways to this place other than through death.

With no means of finding out, Shiroe was thankful that he could still breathe as he explored the depths of his memories.

According to the Half Gaia project, the earth-like world of Elder Tales was divided into 13 servers. This meant that the 14th server was an unofficial test server.

Despite this, it was open to the public.

Players could freely create characters on this test server. Avatars created on it could not be migrated to the normal servers. They could only be used to explore the endless dungeons and the wide underground world of the test server.

This was a win-win situation for both the players as well as the developers.

Players with basic knowledge of the game were excellent debuggers, pointing out bugs and errors in the system being developed by the company for free. Apart from helping with the balancing of the damage and effects of new skills, it also helped garner feedback from players on improving the gaming experience.

For the players, the test server allowed them to experience changes that might be implemented into the game in advance, such as the combat system balance, new skills, items, monsters and how all these changes would affect the game environment. Being a test server debugger was the best way to obtain first-hand information on the new system.

The success of the test server was only possible because of the benefits both parties mutually enjoyed.

While Ataravu Corporation (North America) developed the original Elder Tales, its consequent global updates and versions were the fruits of the test server and its many debugger-players.

Shiroe had an alternate character in this test server.

That avatar was a female Summoner, so the Catastrophe happening to his main account was a good thing.



Although Shiroe was quite knowledgeable about the test server, he wasn't aware that there was a 'surface'. Such information could not be found on international sites either.

As its name suggests, it was an environment created to conduct tests.

The test server Shiroe knew was a collection of dungeons identified only by numbers and the concept of temporal continuity did not exist as old and new versions coexisted at the same time.

When he thought about it, the fact that players couldn't log on to the test server the week before a beta-release of an expansion pack was probably because administrators were tasked with implementing the upgrades.

Shiroe chewed on the information he already had, but was unable to come up with new theories.

He had never heard rumors about being transported to the test server when one died.

Had any other Adventurers noticed that this was the test server?

Shiroe thought that it might be possible.

Since the Half Gaia project didn't encompass the test server, did that mean it was situated on the moon? Such topics had been brought up in overseas forums several times, but were not common knowledge among Japanese players.

Shiroe wouldn't even have known this was the Sea of Tranquility without this background knowledge. The name was in Latin after all.

As Shiroe thought about this, he noticed a figure looking up at him from a very close distance.

The figure belonged to someone Shiroe was very familiar with, Akatsuki.

The young girl in a caramel jacket gazed up at Shiroe with a mixed or troubled, wary and pleading look.

She reminded Shiroe of the shy stray cat that kept on running to his side.

Shiroe nodded, calming Akatsuki down.

He knew that smiling at this elegant lady would turn her pout into a very gentle expression.

A happy and satisfied smile with a bit of shyness.

Shiroe started to walk on the beach, an invitation for Akatsuki to join him. He wouldn't be able to get more information by staying here, and Akatsuki who was twirling by the ocean seemed eager to move on.

The couple took their time walking along the beach.

They couldn't sense any hostility in this place, but this was a whole new world for them.

Shiroe was watching the surroundings carefully while Akatsuki was taking it easy.

Akatsuki turned around watching their footprints in the sand.

Shiroe stopped and turned back. Akatsuki caught up effortlessly with weightless steps, running circles around Shiroe.

The couple continued to advance. Akatsuki led sometimes, played with the waves once in a while or pointed at the birds flying gracefully.

The caramel coat suited the cute swallow like lady very well.

Maybe it was cold, but her face appeared to be slightly red and she would hurry to the front at times.

This must be the world of Elder Tales. With its clear skies and carefree sound of the wind that was unique to the outdoors. It created a symphony together with the waves, forming the background music to this world, with only the footfalls of the couple audible.

Akatsuki seems to be afraid of something as she slowed her pace and fell behind.

Shiroe waited patiently for Akatsuki.

He was not bothered by the wait.

Suddenly, shiny snowflakes fell from the sky.

The scenery was white all around, be it the sand, the sea, Shiroe or Akatsuki. They were all showered under the white glow.

Shiroe reached out and attempted to touch it, but his chest hurt as he was reminded of the fragility of his dreams.

Just like touching snow as a child, he couldn't grab and observe it even if he wanted to.

Shiroe nodded at the wide eyed Akatsuki.

The two of them were looking at an unbelievable sight.

They were going through an incredible experience.

It brought an unfounded sense of quietness and satisfaction to Shiroe.

Fear, anger and regret all melted away in this wintry seaside. The two of them were speechless in front of this sight.

"This is such a quiet place."

Shiroe said as he stopped at the cove with clear blue waters.

"Yes."

Akatsuki beside him answered.

Although it was a short exchange, Shiroe could feel the sense of awe from the sound of her voice.

The toll of a bell sounded from the other side of the sea.

It sounded like an unknown race that had spent tens of thousands of years alone signaling to its comrades.

Shiroe had no basis for this conjecture, but he believed this cove was a special place.

Akatsuki trembled slightly, sighing sadly.

Right then, Shiroe remembered that Akatsuki was also experiencing 'death'.

Although it was temporary, 'death' was still 'death'. It fell onto Akatsuki miserably, leaving a mark. It must be painful, full of humiliation and regret.

But Akatsuki was more matured than Shiroe imagined, her eyes filled with strength.

If this would teach him the meaning of 'death' just like William suggested, Shiroe had the obligation to not waste this lesson. Shiroe swore an oath in his heart.

If this cove took away memories in exchange for teaching Shiroe the meaning of death, then he could offer them himself.

Shiroe made a wish.

In order to become a better person than yesterday, it was a necessary ritual to move beyond regrets and work towards his goals.

Shiroe took out a small blade from his pocket and cut off a piece of memory.

Akatsuki followed Shiroe's lead and cut off the tip of her ponytail, letting it fall into the sea.

The falling snow and the blue seas were all fragments of memories.

The soul in liquid form played the symphony of the waves.

The tears of Adventurers who did not make it to this cove congregated in this ocean. It was not an assumption but a belief. Shiroe could see the Spirit Theory at that moment.

A tiny hand grabbed Shiroe's coat.

Shiroe didn't look away from the sea and muttered, "Amazing."

Both Akatsuki who was nodding and Shiroe calmed the excitement in their heart as they looked out into the sea.

"Did you fall, Akatsuki?"

Akatsuki looked surprised by Shiroe's words and nodded gently.

Akatsuki raised her head and opened her petite mouth.

She wanted to speak.

But this was very difficult for the young lady. No matter how hard she tried, her mouth closed into a line.

Instead of sorrow, Akatsuki's tearful eyes were filled with regret. Akatsuki withheld the pain in her chest, keeping it away from Shiroe.

Shiroe's heart ached as he looked at her. Akatsuki failed after taking on a tough challenge. Shiroe wanted to help her, but he was not by her side.

"Is that so? I am the same too. I died."

"You too my lord?"

"Yeah."

He could see that scene when he closed his eyes. He could hear the steady counting of Silver Sword.

The clashing of blades, the burning inferno and freezing gale magic.

He was not regretting because of failure.

Shiroe was regretting not giving his best. Not accomplishing the things he should have done.

But Akatsuki's eyes were bright.

She might have failed, but she was not giving up.

Shiroe didn't know what had transpired, but he sensed that Akatsuki felt the same way as he did. This pain was Akatsuki's treasure. The determination to take back her glory.

So there was no need to console her.

"I failed. My forecast was too naive... I didn't put in my trust."

He didn't speak more than necessary.

He held back in offering assistance.

He didn't do his best.

"I'm not sure."

Akatsuki sounds like she was on the verge of tears, tempting Shiroe to say something. 'No worries. I understand. Akatsuki did her best, I know very well. You are a little lost now, but a detour is necessary for Akatsuki.'

But Shiroe couldn't say all this right now. The young lady was still battling. Shiroe was also fighting. The raid battle had not ended for either of them.

"This is strange. I never thought I would meet Akatsuki here."

"Right. My lord, this is strange."

He touched Akatsuki's small forehead. He prayed that he could convey the things he was unable to convey over to her.

Shiroe couldn't erase the past. But as Adventurers, they could rise and take up the challenge again.

"That's why, I want to try again."

"I want to have another go too... That's what everyone taught me."

Countless snowflakes fell from the sky.

This world was made from countless memories, forming a horizon with no end.

Understanding this made the world shine brighter.

Shiroe could hear the sound of waves from far away.

Light flooded the whole area, drowning Shiroe and Akatsuki to their toes.

Shiroe smiled at Akatsuki. Their time here was ending.

But they would definitely meet again.

The hand Shiroe was resting on Akatsuki's head fidgeted, he felt troubled. If it were the norm, Akatsuki would have given him a flying kick, admonishing him for treating her like a kid. But the kick didn't come and Akatsuki had a serious expression, so he missed the chance to let go.

Akatsuki looked as if she wanted to say something. But her voice was overwhelmed by the sound of flowing water. He could feel the touch of her silky hair lingering on his fingers.

Shiroe was definitely saved by her gentleness.

Part 3

William opened his eyes and stared at the sky high ceiling.

A painful and hoarse sound leaked from his throat.

He knew how pitiful he looked, but he couldn't stop himself from moaning. He rubbed his eyes violently. Their moisture was obvious to the touch.

He cried like a child. His pitifulness made him feel deflated.

The number of groans he could hear around him increased.

The members of Silver Sword respawned one by one.

This was the entrance to Abyss Shaft, the starting point of the zone.

William's group was wiped out and respawned here.

This was what happens when you were annihilated in raids, different from normal death.

Three raid bosses appeared at the same time and decimated William's group.

Two things were clear to Silver Sword.

First, there was no way to win this fight.

Raids were balanced in difficulty, allowing players of similar levels to win by a tiny margin. Guilds trained repeatedly and equipped their best items to duke it out with the boss, only to win by a hair in the end. That was what raids were about. For a fight with 3 raid bosses at the same time, it was no exaggeration to say that the chance of winning was zero. They knew this very well because they had gotten used to raid battles.

There was no chance of winning this.

The dark despair filled William's heart.

And the second point was... unbelievably grave news. If raid bosses could ally with each other, this could happen anywhere. Silver Sword wouldn't be able to win any other raid battle in this world.

If the quest level was low, for example level 50, they would be able to handle it even if there were 2 raid bosses. But that was not the raid battle William had in mind. They were not a group that found joy in bullying weaklings.

William wanted to challenge raids of the same level, a hot blooded raid battle, but their hope for this had been destroyed.

Williams breathed out a sigh of cold air, feeling a sense of fatigue tormenting him.

He could say the same for his comrades. Low spirited grunts could be heard all over the place.

Everyone in Silver Sword should have reached the same conclusion as William.

The world had denied William and his group.

William forced his withered body up. What he saw was the defeated Silver Sword. This was not the time to joke that he was unwilling to let his comrades see his pathetic side. It wouldn't be so hopeless if they were simply wiped out. The other members' hearts were broken, lacking the strength to even stand, just lying down or curling up in a ball,

suffering and devoid of any strength.

Physical pain was not lethal to Adventurers. But the scar of being abandoned by this world was burned onto their souls.

He heard the sound of sniveling. It was the pathetic sound of adults crying.

William understood why. William experienced it too.

Memory loss was trivial. Compared to the safety conscious D.D.D. Compared to the elite team of Black Sword Knights. Compared to the annoying egalitarian Honesty. William was certain that Silver Sword had been wiped out the most in the entire server.

He understood his blunders and deficiencies the instant between deaths and respawning, freezing his soul. The chilling thoughts ground away his comrades' spirits. Winning by a hair's breadth was fine. Failure was okay too, they could heal, grow and try again. But this failure they couldn't atone for and the regret they couldn't wave off kept lingering.

Voices from his past filled his head.

(So, what is the use of this?)

(Eh... Games huh... Hmmph.)

(Still playing PC games? Isn't mobile gaming enough?)

(Staying home for the holidays?)

Eat shit.

Williams cursed.

(You won't go to karaoke even if we invite you.)

(So you talk to your PC? Wah...)

(Why not take up a hobby that will be useful in the future?)

(It's fine, there are people like this too. What's the harm?)

Eat shit.

William rubbed his face violently.

He wanted to stand up strongly, but his knees trembled shamefully.

He wanted to scream, but he had no words to inspire his guild mates. Should he promise that they would be victorious in the next battle? He couldn't deliver that. It was a lie. Should he ask everyone to cheer up and challenge another raid? He couldn't do that either.

Or could he show a cold face and say "Let them say what they want"? He couldn't do that. His comrades were in despair, he wouldn't be able to reach them with those words.

William's mouth opened wide, his eyes wandering like a lost child.

He looked at Dinkuron. Toko. Junzo. Elten Gracia.

And at his own feet.

William was speechless as he looked at the dismal state his guild was in. After such a merciless beat down, he understood his laziness and incompetence. His heart had sunk to the bottom, there was nothing left.

William searched frantically.

Words that he could share with his comrades.

But he couldn't find anything in his cowardly heart.

"Is this the end?"

He heard a murmur.

He didn't know who, but it was definitely one of his guild mates. From a corner of this spacious hall. All the members who heard held their breath. This was what everyone was afraid to even think about.

The doubt forced William into a corner.

'... Let's return to Susukino and be a charitable guild that upholds the peace.

The People of the Land will be grateful. This is a dog eat dog world. Life is especially hard in Ezzo Empire with all the monster attacks. The people have their hands full just staying alive. In Susukino, Adventurers just need to be gentle and polite to enjoy enormous popularity. Hanging out with the People of the Land, getting a girlfriend would be great. Stop bothering with raids, Silver Sword can handle the task of defending the city easily.'

The stupidity of this line of thought made Williams burn from the inside.

"Maybe. This might be it. I agree... But so what? This is shit."

Williams was driven by his sense of regret and fought back in defiance.

That was a great way to live.

Exchanging a life of danger for a peaceful and comfortable living.

But that was no different from the adults who gave William 'advice' with a smug expression.

"We failed. Wiped out. This might be the end. It was all in vain. Just like what that bunch of people who call us idiots always say, we're trying to do something that is beyond us. Gaming nerd hikkomorisi. Losers... But, so what. We already knew this. From the very beginning. We just like gaming. We chose this path."

It was fine even if it ended, William thought.

But even if they failed, even if this was the end, he would not stop.

There was something he could not let go of.

William felt a burning heat go up his spine and continued.

"This is no big deal. Just losing in a raid. This is not the first time. No need to be so surprised. This is just a mark on the win lose column of this server. Gaming is for kids. Be an adult and return to society... I won't say anything like this. I won't let anyone say this. We lost, and are the worst kind of people. But even if there is a god, I won't let him say we are wasting our time."

Raids were special for William.

It was the heart of Elder Tales, the center of this universe.

"You ask if there is any meaning behind this statistic recorded by the server. Of course there is. Because I said so. I decided that it is a great and amazing thing. Even if god had decided the correct value of everything, it is not applicable in the whole world. People who believe such a dumb idea will never understand. You are wrong because the things you believe in have no value, people who say that will never ever understand. No matter how stupid it looks, or if all of this is a bloody fake, it doesn't matter if I, if we feel that it matters. Isn't this our choice? This is what I choose!"

He could not forgive anyone insulting the sacred oath in his heart. William remained defiant despite the unbearable pain in his heart.

The members of Silver Sword pushed themselves up and sat on the floor, looking at their guild master.

"We have lived inside Elder Tales for a very long time... Whenever formidable foes appear, we will ready our bows and sharpen our swords and take them on. Assaulting them while shouting like children. We win some, we lose some. That's right, all of this are just 1s and 0s in the database, so what. We are in this for the thrill of battle. That was great. We party hard when we win, splitting the phantasmal spoils cheerfully. If we lose we will hold reflection



meetings till the break of dawn. If you dare say this is meaningless then let them say it. This has nothing to do with toys or cheap loot. If we feel that this matters enough for us to spend our time here, then this is our reality!"

William shouted. Filled with regret and fury, he spat out the thoughts in his chest.

But that was all he could do.

His action was like a flame burning bright and hot and then smothering out. Winning and losing was a part of battle.

And raids were the most sacred of all battles.

Inviolable.

Denying this was the same as denying the large amount of time William and the others had invested into this. William lost in this fight and was the loser. And they were unable to do anything to overturn this fact.

That's why William and the others had nothing else to say.

He had nothing left to inspire his guild mates.

"... Because this is the way we are, right? We don't give a shit about guys who have this or that. Those Mr nice guys have everything, so they have no need to do this... Do you guys have it too? Good at everything. Able to make friends wherever you go. Or maybe you are smart, cool, or have a cheerful demeanor, even the knack for telling jokes is fine. Anything, able to glitter in the real world, a sparkling feeling. Do you have it...? I have nothing, nothing at all."

William lowered his head, rumbling on in a tiny voice.

It was no longer about the secret of holy battles.

It was a work of non-fiction, mild and uninteresting compared to Elder Tales, the small confession of William.

William had truly exhausted everything. But even so, the guild master of Silver Sword continued to face everyone.

Part 4

"I have never mentioned this before, was hesitant to say it, but all of you are my friends. Because I can't make friends if I don't play games. How pathetic. I have no motivation... I only made it this far because of this game... It is the reason why I am able to understand how you feel. Just controlling the character with my keyboard. Ah, this guy wants to heal. That guy has retreated, but he really wants to stay at the front lines, something like that. This dude is hesitant to ask, but he really wants those magic buffing gauntlets. Not just these. This one cares about his teammates. Even though he is scared, he still shouted out loud. Giving your all into the game despite being dead tired. I know, I understand very well. I really do."

William squeezed out his thoughts in fragmented sentences.

These were his unpolished, real thoughts.

All he had left was a tiny flicker of fire.

Elder Tales had taught William many things. If not for this, this inarticulate high-schooler wouldn't have been able to found a guild.

Unable to empathize with others. Introvert. Inconsiderate. Uncoordinated. Impatient. Unable to read the mood. Unable to get along with others.

Being accused of all this, the boy withdrew socially. Elder Tales gave the boy a chance to connect with others. He treasured this connection and guarded it carefully. Elder Tales was the first friend he hugged with his skinny arms. If William listened carefully, Elder Tales would reveal many secrets to him.

The first secret was teamwork.

There would be players who did well and players who didn't. If there were people with great skills, there would be people with mediocre skills. What needed to be done in order to cooperate was easy: just accommodate them. Players fared poorly because William did not know what they wanted to do. By adjusting their styles to each other's,

most players would be able to get along well.

Over time, he started raiding.

The level of difficulty in group fights increased gradually, but William did not give up. The group of people he networked with became larger over time. They were people he could get along well with once he got to know them.

The second secret was that their win rates improved as they chatted mindlessly through the night. William learned that those lame jokes had the mysterious power to decide the outcome of a raid.

William learned so many things.

Everyone would have good or bad days. The condition of each individual was important. He would care about how the others were doing. There would be hot headed guys and moody guys. His friends would bear all sorts of problems. This was expected. William realized everyone was in the same situation as him. He understood slowly what they wanted. It was very simple. They were all here for the raid battle, of course they wanted victory.

Who should we heal? Which enemy should we focus our fire on? Move in to attack or take turns and conserve energy? Do we go all out or cap it at 70%?

Even if conflicts arose in their quest for victory, everyone was still working for the best outcome, it was just that the execution wasn't smooth enough. They worked out the errors one by one. Eventually, they edged out a small victory, bringing enormous joy for William and his friends.

The third secret was bitter for Williams

He learned to seek the advice and forgiveness of others.

Williams learned this after his team mates endured his tantrum. He understood after learning it that it was a necessary lesson.

Most battle guilds are short lived. There are at least 20 members winning and losing in harsh raiding conditions. It would be fine if they obtained treasures from every hunt, but phantasmal items might not drop even if you won a challenging raid. There would be members who would be unhappy, bickering for spoils would in turn harm their relations. Under such conditions, battle guilds would disperse in less than 6 months.

When the inevitable intra-guild feud pushed Silver Sword to the brink of dissolving, William learned the de-escalation effect of dialogue. William learned to trust people around him, to say what he really felt. His guild mates understood that their leader was rash, but he was not malicious. This was a lucky break for a battle guild.

William thought about how much better it would have been if he learned these secrets earlier. But on the other hand, he only learned them because he wanted to protect his guild.

As William learned the secret of being with others, Silver Sword gained fame as an up-and-coming raiding guild.

"That is why I understand... the feeling that this is the end. Game over. We are finished. I can genuinely feel it. This is probably it. But..."

William understood.

Everybody was disheartened right now.

He knew, challenging such an important raid and ending up here like pitiful dogs. He couldn't even look his pathetic friends in the eye.

"To be honest, I was so happy when I came to this world. You guys probably felt some joy too. There shouldn't be anyone here who totally hates this situation right? This is the world of Elder Tales. The world we are so passionate about. The place where we are better at fighting raids than anyone else. I think things will work out. Putting this nonsense aside, I am glad I can spend time with you guys. All of you are losers. Well, I'm a loser too. Whatever, it's fine if we can fight in raids. In this world, no one can treat us like idiots."

William sniveled.

The battle-hardened sniper elf known as the Eyes of Mystery was no more.

"Even so, it is unacceptable to run away because we failed! Come on! We might not win. We will probably lose. It's almost a given we will fail. But no, there are things we cannot give up on. What are we going to do if we go back now? What legacy will we leave behind if this goes on...? Our addiction to Elder Tales is on the stupendous level. I have played Elder Tales for 2 years. I think about it from morning to night. I think about it even when I eat, shower or sleep. I even study for the sake of Elder Tales. It's fine if you say I have no life. I am a gamer with no social life. I will be overjoyed the whole night because of one unique item, a social outcast. I give my heart and soul for this. That's why I won't back down even if the number of raid bosses increases by 2 or 3. Besides, where can we escape to! Escape to a place where gamers are treated like retards? Making friends without fighting raids? Calling this a waste of time with a smug smile? Such bastards should just die."

Unreasonable.

Not escaping meant you would keep on dying? He considered this for a while.

They were able to hold on so far because there was a chance of victory. But it was hopeless now.

'What you are doing is playing games, it is the same even if this world had changed. You bunch of good for nothing can't even beat the game now...' How were they going to face this reality?

"I... I have run away before. It weighs heavily in my heart, but I understand now. In the city of Akiba, at the first Round Table Conference. I just came into contact with this world back then and all I wanted to do was fight in raids. For the sake of raiding, I gave up on joining the Round Table Council. It's true, no lie. Also, I was thinking, 'what is this bunch of people trying to accomplish. Isn't that a waste of time?' I also thought, 'going at it so seriously even though there is no way it will work, what a bunch of pigs.' I despised them. I almost wanted to beat them all up, I really did. What a joke. I understand now. I was running away. I ran away because I thought it would fail."

But there were players who didn't run.

For William, it was a sense of longing.

In the face of challenging raids, a legendary group that did not form a guild held their own against powerful battle guilds.

The newbie William was thrilled by their exploits.

This newbie aimed to join this excellent group one day and worked towards that.

When William grinded to level 90, that group disbanded. William felt betrayed. They didn't wait for him. The members all went their own ways and did not form a guild. He didn't understand why they were abandoning their legacy. That's what William thought.

"But Shiroe won. He completed a quest I thought was meaningless and impossible to win, and established Akiba. That was a quest to build a city, not an easy thing to do... I think he is a great raid commander."

The players who persevered and didn't run.

The player he looked up to in the past was amazing indeed.

"That Shiroe lowered his head and asked for help, so I took the job gleefully... It is natural to have no chance of success. With the Black Heart Glasses here, you know how hard this trip is going to be. Just look at his smug and sadistic face and you will understand! But... I still felt happy. I thought it would be fine if we won. Because... we are crazy game addicts!"

The atmosphere was heated. When William looked up, he saw the pained expressions of his comrades who had nowhere to go.

They might win if they tried again.

He entrusted the heat of this feeling to them. William had ignited the fire in his guild mates.

But he didn't feel victorious or any sense of accomplishment, just a heavy sense of pressure and responsibility.

Guild Master William was leading his guild to a hopeless place with no chance of victory. Neither Krusty nor Isaac would make such a decision. They would maintain their identity as a battle guild, understand the intent of the Round Table Council and provide assistance, that's how good they were.

(I am a seriously stupid guild master.)

William bit down on his trembling lips.

The taste of iron spread in his mouth as he ignored the eyes on him and searched for a solution.

He wanted to win. He thirsted for victory like never before, not for his own glory, but a strong desire to win it for his friends.

Part 5

Shiroe awakened just like the dawn dyeing the sky blue. He could hear a speech like rays of light reflected from the water.

A sorrowful groan.

The voice of a man protesting against an unreasonable reality.

William's voice was soft, but Shiroe heard him clearly as he regained consciousness. Pushed along by William's words, Shiroe began to talk to himself.

Shiroe who spent plenty of time alone talked to himself frequently. Since there was a 'self' that answered questions, it was evident that he was consciously replying to the question.

He started with working out the situation and evaluating what the future held.

Sweeping aside the feeling of being hung over and his doubts about respawning, Shiroe started analyzing the strategy for the raid battles and the surrounding zones.

He understood within the first 15 seconds that they were in a very difficult situation. It was more appropriate to say it was impossible. Only 24 players could invade this zone, it was impossible to match the enemies in strength.

They could defeat '7th of the garden' Ruseato by itself.

They understood its 'characteristics' very well. Black mode possessed powerful single unit attacks and reflected close proximity attacks with wide area attacks. White mode regenerated health and summoned minions.

In general, all raid bosses had 'characteristics'. They would perform special actions or take on alternate forms according to the amount of time that had passed or the percentage of health left. Understanding these 'characteristics' and coming up with plans to counter them were the basics of fighting raid bosses.

They had completed their research on the 'characteristics' of '7th of the garden' Ruseato. This didn't mean that victory was assured, but they could win this by practicing a few times. The practice run need not be a fight to the death. Even if the front line collapsed, they could make a strategic retreat. This meant there was a chance of victory.

The attacks of the titans, '4th of the garden' frost giant Tarutauruga and '3rd of the garden' flaming serpent Ibra-Habura were another matter. The scouting reports for these raid bosses were incomplete. They were not sure how similar they were to '4th of the prison' Tarutauruga and '3rd of the prison' Ibra-Habura, but the blow that wiped out Shiroe and the others were wide area attacks. Probably normal area attacks with cool down times of 50 to 150 seconds. They were not mortal blows or 'characteristics' they had to work around. Shiroe didn't know where to start.

The attack were launched simultaneously. On top of that, there was a chance the other boss in this zone would enter the fray. No matter how you looked at it, you had to wave the white flag. There was no way to win this.

Shiroe heard the alarm ringing in his heart. "Don't think about why it can't be done, think about a way to solve this." Shiroe was thankful for this quote, but it was easy to say, but the requirements were always so intense.

In Shiroe's mind, there were blue cards to his right. These were his advantages and weapons. Silver Sword's proficiency, the existence of allies, and the support of the Round Table Council, things he knew.

The challenge he faced morphed into cards some distance away on his right. Ruseato, Tarutauruga and Ibra-Habura. And an unknown boss. They had explored and mapped out the dungeon for the most part. There were just 3 or 4 more bosses left.

He came up with several plans and lined them up before him according to their feasibility. All of them provided dismal chances of success, so he tried to mix them up to increase the probability of winning. There was not much to discuss as they were not ready for practical application.

All sorts of reforms in this world were limited to individuals. Take the development of cooking recipes for example, the level of the Chef dictated the success of making the dish. The constraints were much stricter in battles. There were lots of powerful weapons in this world, but they were governed by the level requirement. For example, if Shiroe made a Gatling gun or mortar, he couldn't use them. Instead of powerful weapons and magic, what was important was coming up with a way to break through.

He knew this was just picking on semantics, but Shiroe was dismissing the word retreat from his dictionary.

This time, Shiroe was analyzing the weak points of the enemy instead of the advantages Shiroe had.

Most raid bosses had a fixed attack pattern. There might not be any obvious weak points, but looking carefully, there were gaps between attacks which he could exploit.

The moment of inspiration struck, and Shiroe grabbed hold of this line of thought desperately.

Be it prison or garden, they were the guardian of something. Now that they were self-aware, were they still bound to their obligations? Although they worked together in the last fight, the fact that reinforcements only arrived when the battle was heating up was something they could use. But he might be putting too much expectation in this.

Shiroe threw his wishful thinking away and searched for a more practical strategy. But after dozens of simulations, he couldn't think of a more realistic idea.

The plan with so many flaws held the best probability of success.

He didn't work out the correct probability, but it was worth a shot.

"Yo, Shiroe, are you awake?"

"... Yeah."

The voice came from Naotsugu who was observing him.

Shiroe sat up and stretched his stiff back. Beneath him was a marble platform covered with a blanket. He was not sure what happened, but it seemed that someone carried him onto this marble while he was asleep.

Naotsugu who was glancing his way relaxed when he saw Shiroe adjust his glasses. He turned around and gazed into the central square.

Tetora sat with her knees to her chest nearby. There were just the two of them beside Shiroe.

He could hear William talking. He couldn't believe that this was the guild master of one of the leading guilds within the server. His voice was trembling slightly but it was full of pride.

Shiroe heard his speech when he was lying there with his eyes closed.

He could hear plenty of groans and sighs of frustration at their own powerlessness.

Shiroe let out a long sigh and nod.

As Shiroe's group gaze at them, the Silver Sword members in the central square picked themselves up slowly with their eyes on their guild master. This speech was not meant for outsiders like Shiroe to hear. Shiroe felt awkward about this and was glad that Naotsugu moved him to this corner away from the crowd. But William's speech was necessary for Shiroe. The man standing there was the 16-year-old version of Shiroe.

Elder Tales brought too much pain to Shiroe.

He was given lots of nicknames. He was constantly used like utility tools by others and no one looked him in the eye.

But at the same time, it brought him great gifts.

Chief Nyanta, Nurukan, Aihye. Everybody was great friends. He learned to be easygoing from Kanami. He learned self-restraint from Kazuhiko. He learned about trust from Naotsugu.

Shiroe watched Silver Sword from afar, thinking to himself that it was a fine guild. Not only was William a fine guild master, but so were the guild members who made it through 'that'. He felt a stinging pain in his chest. What if he were the one there under these circumstances? He would definitely pull himself up, but whether he would be able to inspire his comrades was another question.

What would he say to Minori and Tohya when he was disheartened? What can he do for Isuzu and Rudy? He couldn't see himself being able to do anything.

He thought briefly about Akatsuki, but all he could see in his mind was the angry face of the petite Assassin.

Shiroe was amused and laugh.

'Protecting my lord is my duty, so mind your own business,' she would probably said something like that.

Humans were complicated. Shiroe knew that Akatsuki was worried about him. She always looked like she was shunning away from others, but Shiroe noticed that she was more worried about him than anyone else. Shiroe knew that Akatsuki was fighting her own battles out there too.

This was not the time to wallow in self-pity.

"You want them to win. Right, Mr Shiroe?"

Tetora who was hugging her knees swayed her body and muttered.

Shiroe could only see her back from his view. But he still replied with a determined 'yeah'. He was relieved. Shiroe wanted to win. He wanted to make it through this challenge with this raiding group, Silver Sword. Tetora's straightforward words helped Shiroe materialize the will in his heart.

"You have a way with words."

"I am a top-class idol after all."

Naotsugu and Tetora made a short exchange as they looked at William who was gazing into the distance.

Even though they didn't say much, their wills overlapped. They were not sure what victory entailed, but they definitely wouldn't let Silver Sword rust away.

They had already decided. The problem now was how to execute it.

"So, what should we do? Any ideas, strategist?"

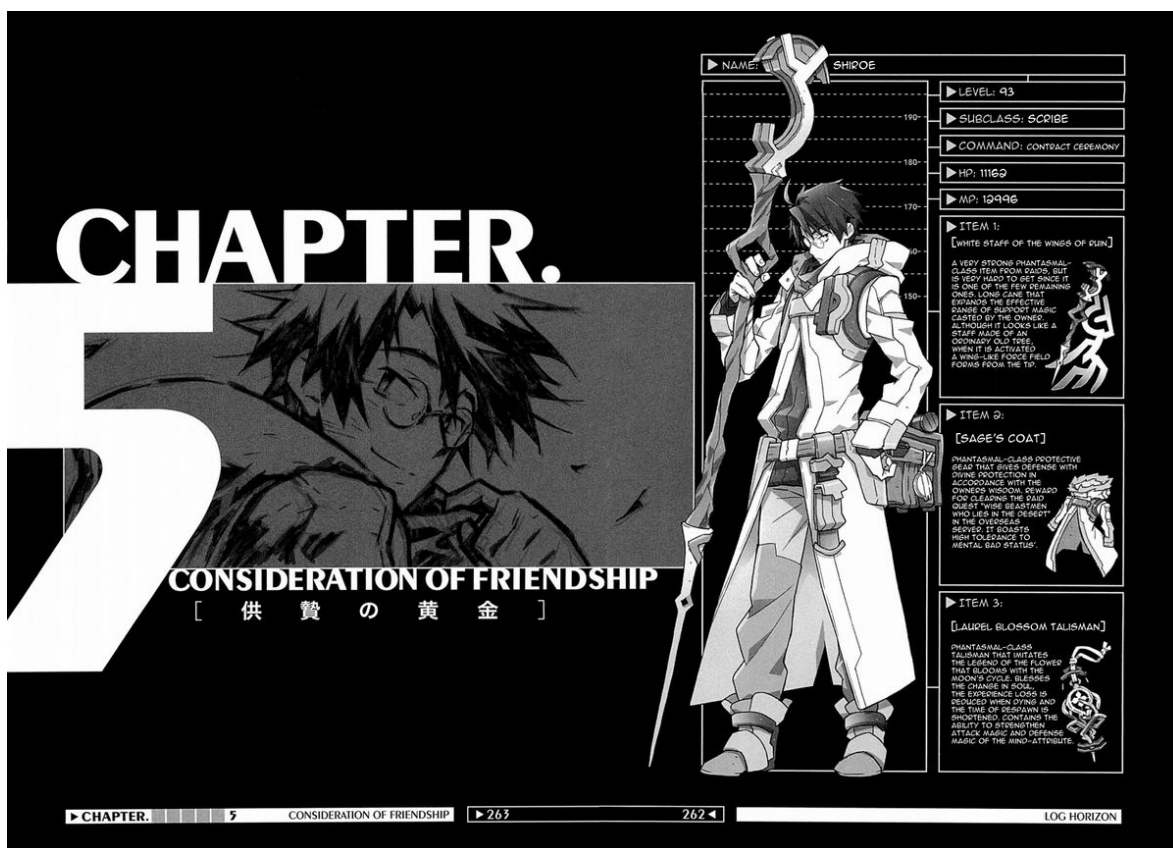
Naotsugu tone remained bright and positive. Although he phrased it as a question, he just needed confirmation. Shiroe's best friend had no doubt that there was a way to win this. He was confident that Shiroe would definitely think of something. Shiroe adjusted his glasses and replied.

"I have something I need to tell Naotsugu. And Tetora. And William. And everybody. Why we are fighting this raid. What lies in the deepest end? Why do I need money? I need to explain myself. I ignored the good will of everyone, hoping to complete the objective by myself. If you are willing to forgive me... I have a plan that just might work. But just barely. The chance of success is about 15%."

"Just the way I like it."

"Perfect."

"I also have things I need to tell Mr. Kinjo, and the things regarding this land. This time, I am going to look him in the eye and say it."



Chapter 5: Consideration of Friendship

Part 1

The Abyss Shaft raid team used one week for preparation.

They reinforced their camp and made dozens of forceful reconnaissances. They wiped out all other enemies except the bosses. They did their best to replenish their perishables and headed towards the battlefield.

Federico felt his breathing become shallow and took a deep breath.

The scenery in front of him was no different from last week.

The imposing dark purple figure of '7th of the garden' Ruseato loomed in the center of the circular arena.

The arena where the battle last week was fought was shrouded in silence.

Federico kept his eyes on his party leader Shiroe and waited for the signal.

Federico felt this taciturn young man had changed over the past week.

He mingled more with the other party members after that defeat. Federico knew he was a good Enchanter, but he was even better now. Federico had gotten used to the new staff Shiroe drew out from his bag.

They could not afford to hold back anymore, they had to do whatever it took to increase their probability of success. Federico felt that Shiroe had responded well to their expectations.

The problem of food reserves was also resolved by Shiroe's group.

They provided ingredients from their bags without reservation, improving both the quantity and quality of their meals. The party's beginner Chef Vuorinen was grateful. Some members commented 'so you can't bear to part with your food before this?' but that opinion faded away in no time.

They were guests of Silver Sword after all, so they couldn't push the blame solely on Shiroe and his group.

Being wiped out was the turning point.

Although 'death' was scary and painful, it could bring people together sometimes. Friends from high school or college could get along quite well, but the bonds between members of raid groups were on another level. Sharing this painful experience together elevated their relationships from friends to a band of brothers.

(Although you can't be friends with people you despise...)

Federico thought as he bit his lips.

(But brothers in arms can't work together if they hate each other.)

That was the case for Shiroe. It was the same for Demiqas too.

Azalea closed his eyes in meditation and raised his right hand.

He cast the Summoner's spell Soul Possession. With it, the Summoner could possess a summoned familiar for reconnaissance. He dismissed the spell, shook his head a couple of times and made a curt report to William. "The standby mode position remains unchanged. No signs of other enemies."

The same result after a week of repeated scouting.

The raid bosses might have learned to cooperate, but they still had their own thoughts and preferences, they weren't perfect. Log Horizon's Shiroe mentioned this several times this past week. If you talked to him, you would find that he was a nice chap who thought far ahead. But according to the rumors from Akiba, Shiroe was a mastermind who could manipulate the minions of hell.

(I'm fine with him being either type.)

Federico thought.

Shiroe was an introvert. His shy expression felt like a brick wall. His explanations were hard to grasp and a bit long winded. But these were minor flaws. The members of Silver Sword couldn't really criticize others. They were just a bunch of recluses, every one of them had issues of their own. Shiroe might be a weird guy, but among Federico's friends, he belonged to the bunch with common sense.

Shiroe chanted a short spell and activated it. The Enchanter's Elixir spell increased the potency of recovery spells.

Vuorinen cast Heartbeat Healing, conjuring a bright green light that was injected into Federico's body. The recovery rate had definitely increased. Federico was grateful to Shiroe who continued to cast buffing magic on everyone.

Preparation time was over. It was time for Silver Sword to shine.

This was the continuation of that night when William bared his heart for all to see.

They counted down quietly. Naotsugu rushed out as it went down to zero. The Guardian in the 2nd party left the others far behind and charged '7th of the garden' Ruseato alone.

(Wait for it. Wait for it...)

William's left arm was stretched out horizontally as he surveyed the whole arena, Federico and the others were waiting eagerly. William stared at Naotsugu's back, waiting for the first attack.

"Castle of Stone!!"

Naotsugu roared as he lifted his shield. This was the special skill of Guardians that negated all damage. Using these 10 seconds of invincibility, Naotsugu took the first hit of the raid, the fierce attack Death Knell Moon.

"Now!"

William charged as he shouted.

Federico was right behind him.

Death Knell Moon and Kneeling Dark Silver Swing were the special attacks of Ruseato in black knight mode. Even the elite tank Dinkuron needed the support of defense buffs and health regeneration in order to endure these two attacks. Shiroe's comrade Naotsugu negated it with his Castle of Stone. From their previous battle, they had determined that Death Knell Moon had a cool down time of 90 seconds. This meant that Ruseato couldn't use Death

Knell Moon for the next 87 seconds. Ruseato didn't have any other powerful wide area attacks.

Kneeling Dark Silver Swing was a powerful single target strike. During this time, Federico and the others could move to their assigned positions safely.

Although this was to be expected in raid battles, a Guardian from a small guild pulling it off so perfectly made Federico smile.

Even now, they were afraid of 'death'.

But their emotions were sky high.

The moment he charged forward with his comrades at his side, the instant they executed their difficult team battle, Federico's heart was like a toy plane flying in the wind. Others might think this was a dumb and naive emotion, but Federico borrowed the patented quote from his guild master, 'I don't give a shit.'

Just like that night when William screamed and challenged the world, this was the path Federico chose.

Federico had died numerous times since he arrived in this world.

Time and again he rose back from the darkness. He was reminded of the regret and frustration over and over again.

But he had no memory of meeting his comrades in the darkness, and he found out it was the same for his comrades when they chatted. This made Federico glad. Some said this was only natural as they were just playing a game. But to him, Silver Sword was his home and he could call his guild mates brothers without hesitation. He felt that all this was proven.

... Friends.

It felt awkward to say this term.

At his age, it was troublesome to differentiate friends from acquaintances, and it was hard to classify people like this anyway. They might be close or distant to you, it didn't really matter. As a fresh graduate entering the workforce, this was how Federico felt.

But hearing the term friends from his high schooler guild master, his eyes felt warm. Federico felt complicated.

Maybe he would return to the original world one day.

The daily life alternating between his work place and residence. In reflection, having the resolve to die in a fight was really incredible.

It was not bad, but he would definitely refuse if he was asked to stop. This was a raid zone, and they were the raiders.

"Viper Strike Rush!"

Using the dark purple gauntlet as a springboard, Federico leaped into the air and attacked Ruseato's arm with his flamberge. The venomous Viper Strike Rush did not deal a lot of damage, but it added the bleeding debuff and reduced accuracy by 4%.

This number was not trivial for raid battles. They would be able to reduce healing by this amount, lowering the MP usage rates allowing them to keep battling longer. Federico would say that this was the 4% that would increase their chance of winning.

Dinkuron relieved Naotsugu's duty as the main tank.

He might be the handsome boy in Silver Sword, but he was equipped with phantasmal armor from head to toe, and wouldn't back down even from Isaac of Black Sword Knights. Contrary to his normal gentle voice, he was shouting loud enough to shatter ear drums. War Cry, a skill that extended the effects of items and increased resistance to status debuffs.

Federico felt a surge of energy through his body.

He moved to Ruseato's back and dealt much heavier blows than before. Alternating between vertical and horizontal strikes, his skills allowed other attackers to deal heavier damage. Considering the battle plan this time, having a good

start was crucial.

About ten meters away from the edge of the arena where the battle with '7th of the garden' Ruseato was being fought, the sound of two dull metallic thuds could be heard.

Silver Sword's Samurai Ranodomaru used 'Zentetsuken'.

As they had investigated in advance, cutting out a bar from the metal gate was enough for humans to pass through easily.

Federico snuck a glance as he continued his attack.

(It isn't time yet!)

The attack output against Ruseato was ramped up. There was not much Ruseato could do. Naotsugu had nullified his most damaging skill, and he had nothing that could take out Dinkuron's watertight defense.

Dinkuron and the others would be massacred with ease if Ruseato called for aid, but it had suffered less than 10 percent damage so far. He probably wouldn't ask for help yet... Federico was able to wipe away his fear by following this line of thought.

There was no guarantee. There was a chance that the other 2 bosses would join the fray at any time. Other bosses might turn up too... There was simply no way to tell. These were all deductions made through scouting the map and the team work among the Guardians.

With the slow passage of time, Federico kept up the attack and kept the status quo, waiting for the plan to start.

They thirsted for victory.

They wanted to quench the thirst in their hearts, putting their all in strike after strike.

Federico's sword Sigh of Musuperu turned into a mini typhoon through the might of Adventurers, pelting the armor of Ruseato with numerous blows. Cracks appeared on the armor under the fiery attacks, the ricochet scratching Federico's face. But Federico paid it no heed.

Federico didn't know he was the kind of guy who preferred doing things right until recently.

He understood this in the past week.

Wanting to be victorious did not equate to the desire to bring down powerful foes, gaining fame or fortune. It definitely did not equate to bearing emotions of hate or anger.

He just wanted a proper reward.

This was a raid William wanted to win so bad that he cried.

A fight where Silver Sword laid their lives on the line.

Federico didn't want all their efforts to be for naught. He didn't want this to be a meaningless challenge they kept up because of their own stupidity. If that were true, wouldn't that be sad?

He bore no grudge against Ruseato. He even felt a sense of respect for it.

Federico and Silver Sword just wanted to verify one thing.

They were not wrong. They were stronger.

All he wanted was to prove it.

"The limit point!"

William let out a shrill cry as the support and healing characters rushed off. '7th of the garden' Ruseato was morphing. The armor covered in cracks shed off like a layer of skin, revealing a body as white as snow beneath... its appearance had changed to that of the white knight mode.

The black armor turned into a shadow like swamp, turning into countless warriors. The Adventurers within the trap zone of Ruseato had restricted movement. It stuck to their feet and stopped the players from moving. In order to avoid this area, the raid group changed its formation.

"Hurry! Shiroe's party will lead!"

Following William's command, the group jumped into the other side of the iron gates one by one. '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura awaited them there.

The counter attack of Federico and company started here.

Part 2

Demiqas was among the first to infiltrate the western passageway.

The corridor with a high granite ceiling interspaced with giant pillars extended in a straight path far ahead. The end of the tunnel was hazy like the sunset, but they knew through advance reconnaissance that flaming snake Ibra-Habura was in the large hall ahead.

Demiqas looked around restlessly as he followed Naotsugu in front of him.

In Demiqas' eyes, the armor clad Guardian Naotsugu was as slow as a tortoise. He might look like he was sprinting, but his speed was half of Demiqas'. Demiqas would be able to pull away with either a Wyvern Kick or Phantom Step.

But he would just charge headfirst into the flaming snake if he did that. He had to stay behind Naotsugu to avoid that even if he hated it.

The group was led by Naotsugu and Demiqas.

The tank of the 1st party Dinkuron was the rear guard, fending off the shadow warriors as they retreated. They couldn't move fast this way. With their main defensive party fighting in the rear, Demiqas and the others had to hold the front.

The opening phase of the plan was simple.

The last time all hell broke loose, '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura and '4th of the garden' Tarutauruga opened the giant gates and entered.

The gaps in the gates were too narrow for them to slip through, and it seemed that it could only be opened from the other side.

The scripted event was probably the two gates opening up after they defeated '7th of the garden' Ruseato. But that was not the case this time.

The plan this time was to use the maze like layout of the dungeon.

This meant that using this arena as a prison to isolate Ruseato was the gist of the plan. Ruseato was unable to pass through the iron gates and enter the passageway so he couldn't pursue the group escaping through the western passageway. But it was possible for him to break down the gate with his destructive attacks, that's why they engaged Ruseato until he turned into the white knight mode with weak attacks. If they didn't defeat all the shadow warriors, Ruseato wouldn't be able to move when in white knight mode.

They had already scouted ahead using a covert type summon. They had already been briefed on several possible situations that might arise, but it was a relief for this situation to prevail.

Ruseato couldn't open or destroy the gate and was effectively nullified. The frost giant Tarutauruga situated in the east might open the gate into the arena, but he wouldn't be able to access the western passageway, just like Ruseato. They had been cut out of the equation. If Demiqas' group defeated Ibra-Habura and progressed into the depths of the zone, they could conquer this dungeon.

... But none of the raid members felt that it would be so easy to achieve victory.

Even if they defeated Ibra-Habura, there was no guarantee that there wouldn't be another raid boss waiting. According to Shiroe's interpretation of the dungeon layout, you could reach Ibra-Habura's lair by going the long way from the eastern passageway. Once Ibra-Habura fell into danger, '4th of the garden' Tarutauruga would definitely

rush over.

It was only an optimistic speculation that Ruseato and Tarutauruga could not destroy the iron gates. They should assume that it would buy them some time, but would eventually fall. And if it did, they couldn't attempt this again since the gate would be destroyed.

That's the situation. Even though Demiqas and the other Adventurers could respawn, the situation would keep on changing. The same opportunity would not come twice. The members of Silver Sword were tense as they ran down the corridor.

(Damn it!)

But this was to be expected.

There was no way to predict all the possibilities. Even grade-schoolers knew this. There were so many uncertainties in this plan and anything could happen. Like waking up on a Sunday morning to eat breakfast while watching TV. How many times could things go just the way you wanted? Things not going your way was the norm in the real world.

The alternate world of Elder Tales lured you into letting down your guard and forgetting about uncertainties. You thought that this was just a game, thinking everything would go just as you planned. Because you could do that, it created the illusion that everything you did would be successful.

He was beaten badly by Shiroe.

Demiqa knew. This world where things didn't go your way was their reality. And he knew because he fell for the illusion. He was tricked by the game like appearance he saw in his tiny world. His journey here was the same. But he had warned himself to not let his guard down. But his wariness dripped away slowly like water flowing from a tap and he underestimated this world again.

(I wasn't careful and failed in this dull place. I was taking it lightly and failed... Because I underestimated that bunch of people, that's why I failed.)

Demiqa remembered the skinny lady with her hands on her hips looking at him.

An unhappy face, she was probably looking down at Demiqa. That couldn't be helped. Demiqa had hurt the People of the Land deeply. He didn't kill anyone, but he had treated them with violence, traded them like commodity and worked them like slaves. Of course he would be hated. The only reason stopping them from seeking revenge was his physical prowess.

That woman was thin like chicken ribs, lacking sex appeal. When Demiqa glared at her with his fierce eyes, she would say with a mocking smile. 'If you think you are the master just by saying it then just kill me.' That was her favorite phrase. 'If you can't kill me then get out of the way, don't get in the way of my chores.' She scolded him.

Demiqa was utterly defeated.

People of the Land died when they were killed. They knew this very well, but they lived on valiantly using this one life they had. They used what little they had to leave their mark on this world. Demiqa's life seemed so cheap in contrast.

Demiqa underestimated this alternate world.

He lost to Shiroe because he thought this was just a game.

Before he could learn from his errors, he lost against the powerless People of the Land.

He lost to Silver Sword too. He was defeated when they met for the first time in that bar, and he was floored over and over again, leaving Brigandia in a dire state.

And now, he lost to the raid bosses. There might be a way to salvage this, but he lost to William as a guild master. Even after that crushing defeat, there were still 20 odd gaming nerds willing to follow William.

Demiqa had nothing left to lose.

The white corridor made from stone bricks came to an end abruptly.

The tall ceiling had reached the new height of a 6 story building. The giant spherical space before them was shaped like an egg 30m in diameter.

The walls were made from yellow stones with bright orange stripes. Stairs several meters wide along the walls spiraled down into the pit. Puddles of blue waters were scattered all over. The vast space had surprisingly bright colors, illuminated by white lights.

"This smell..."

"Ah ah, hot spring festival."

Naotsugu answered Shiroe in a way that even Demiqas understood. This was the smell of sulfur. The stones had all been soaked in various chemicals.

The group descended down the stairs spiraling round the edge of the pit. At the bottom lay the sleeping giant snake Ibra-Habura.

This was probably the raid boss' standby mode.

As they planned, Naotsugu leapt off from the end of the stairs and charged at the great serpent.

The support was minimal, but they didn't have time to make complete preparations. Naotsugu headed in without complete preparations.

Naotsugu attacked with the support of Tetora's reactive heal and Vuorinen's healing over time. Demiqas couldn't see any hesitation in his action, an excellent move.

Demiqa bent slightly and jumped off like a spring, flying through the air. The members of Silver Sword also joined the fray.

It became a chaotic battle immediately.

The opening at the corner of the pit was probably the 'answer'. At the deepest end of this entrance was the finish line. But there were no 'convenient' gates blocking the entrance to block off any pursuers. They had to take down '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura here. And they needed to do that before '4th of the garden' Tarutauruga arrived.

The distance attack team probably lost their cool, shooting ice arrow spells prematurely.

Demiqa cursed at their incompetence, but Naotsugu just barely managed to draw Ibra-Habura's attention.

A fire storm appeared before his eyes, feeling more like a natural disaster than fighting a monster. Naotsugu used Anchor Howl and became a sturdy suit of armor, swinging his sword to aggravate his foe. In the short time the fight had went on the amount of hate the tank drew from the monster was still unstable, Demiqas had already learned that. He understood how much the attackers wanted to deal damage as soon as possible, but being too hasty might pull in too much hate and lead to tragedy.

"Fortress stance! Let me test the performance of my new armor and shield!"

Naotsugu braced himself and leaned forward, as though as he was holding up a wall with his back. Blue aura jettisoned from his heels, this was the defensive skill used by Guardians. He blocked the enemies' strikes with his shield while attacking with his sword. This skill traded mobility for a boost in defense, a skill not available to Monks like Demiqas.

But Demiqas had skills Naotsugu lacked too, which were wings known as mobility.

"Ora ora ora! Aura Saber!"

Demiqa launched a downward flying kick from midair.

The attack followed a path similar to the slash of a giant axe, hitting the scales of the burning snake. It must have some effect. Aura Saber ignored defense ratings and damaged the opponent directly. The Energy Protection spell of the Druids reduced flame damage significantly, so Demiqas wouldn't lose too much health as he attacked.

Demiqa's dodged the tail of '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura, which was the size of a mini bus with his Phantom Step. He leapt into the air with afterimages trailing behind him and unleashed a Wyvern Kick.

Wyvern Kick again.

Another Wyvern Kick.

The sole of his Storm Assault Sabaton Boots, which seemed to be cut directly from heavy armor, sent mind numbing shocks to the scalp of his head. If he were to do this in Susukino, the abandoned buildings would crumple into a mountain of debris. Not just Demiqa's. As Demiqa's flew by in a blur of green, Federico was also striking with his flaming blade repeatedly, surrounding Ibra-Habura with the other melee fighters, like midgets around a giant.

Suddenly, Demiqa's feet emitted a silvery glow.

This was Shiroe's buffing spell Keen Edge.

(That bastard!)

Demiqa's snapped his tongue in displeasure. He wanted to spit, but his mouth was dry because of the immense heat emitted by the giant snake. Demiqa's attacked Ibra-Habura's mouth to vent his anger with Tiger Echo Fist. It had low accuracy, but he couldn't miss when the size of the raid boss was so big.

The slithery eyes of the reptile focused on Demiqa's, filled with killing intent.

"Wide area attack, fall back!"

The melee warriors left the front lines on William's command. But Demiqa's remained behind like a guardian statue, crossing his arms in front of his face. Demiqa's wanted to take the hit straight on.

Without any hesitation or regret, Demiqa's expressed his will in his own way.

Demiqa's didn't move an inch as the flame vortex spewed by Ibra-Habura encircled him.

Part 3

Naotsugu watched the sea of flames coming at him. This was different from what he saw through his monitor when playing the game. It felt like as if the poisonous flame was sticking onto him and swallowing him whole.

But even in this hellish scene, Naotsugu maintained his stance leaning forward with his eyes barely open.

He felt hot with the flame roasting him. But the sensation was on par with lying naked on asphalt under the bright summer sun. It hurt, but was bearable.

Naotsugu observed that the flames hit him in waves, and took a deep breath as one wave subsided. He held his breath as if he were diving in water. He was doing this to prevent damage to his lungs, but it seemed like he wouldn't be hurt lethally even if he breathed some of the fire in.

(That arrogant Monk isn't bad in a fight.)

Naotsugu was covered by Tetora's reactive heal, Vuorinen's health regeneration and Toko's damage negation shield. These spells were known as classic healing magic. The wide area attack, Merciless Purgatory Feast was strong. The damage negation shield of a Kannagi could cancel out 6000 points of damage. Together with the reactive heal of 900 points, the damage seemed too low. Naotsugu wouldn't be surprised if the hit just now pushed him to the edge of death.

Demiqa's shared the brunt of the damage with Naotsugu.

He probably used Cover Ring, a skill which allowed you to share the damage taken with teammates nearby. Demiqa's the Monk had higher resistance to elemental attacks and health than Naotsugu. By spreading out the damage this way, Naotsugu would be able to stay on the frontlines. Naotsugu had a newfound respect for Demiqa's.

"Alright, here I go! Taunting Blow!"

Naotsugu attacked to aggravate Ibra-Habura.

The giant flaming serpent was terrifying. The enormous head butted with a force which rivaled a heavy truck, the wide open mouth was as intimidating as heavy construction machinery. It closed in with the speed of an out of control train, making your legs stiffen and vision narrow.

But Naotsugu shook off the pressure and cracked a smile.

He was pushing himself, he had no spare strength to smile at all.

But having nothing to spare was hard to explain. You didn't really feel that you were running on empty, but it did seem like you had nothing left. Even if you had a 3 day weekend, you still couldn't find the effort to do your chores. Even during the hellish period when you were so busy you had to sleep in the office, you could still find the strength to find a particular brand of pudding in the convenience store. That's how it was.

That's why he still had the spare energy to smile. He could squeeze one out even if he was running on empty.

Naotsugu held on to this belief and swung his blade.

Pulling in hate with his roar, adopting a defensive stance with his shield, he refused to back down.

And he kept on smiling. That's how Naotsugu was when he took on the role of the main tank in a raid group.

"Bring it on!"

Everyone should have noticed Naotsugu's shout. William gave instructions from the back, "Maintain damage output and shift to the left!"

Naotsugu's smile deepened. As expected, William got it.

It had been more than 3 weeks since they invaded Abyss Shaft. They could build on their mutual understanding during this period of time. Naotsugu understood how William thought. William should be able to understand Naotsugu's intentions as well.

Naotsugu's body was bathed in recovery spells repeatedly, pushing his hit points up.

Demiqas was doing a great job, but his health had fallen below 30%. Unlike Demiqas who was brought in like a relief pitcher in baseball, Naotsugu had no time to rest. Sharp scales were fired at Naotsugu repeatedly. To reduce damage and tank the next big attack, replenishing Naotsugu's health was the basics in ensuring the safety of the group. Naotsugu accepted their assistance without hesitation.

In the midst of the fierce battle, Naotsugu thought about the old days.

That was a fun place to play in, compared to this alternate world. Naotsugu served as the main tank for the Debauchery Tea Party, so he had experience with raids. In fact, Debauchery Tea Party was a group that went for raids at an insane rate because of Kanami's nature. She treated the raids as just an obstacle blocking their way. They went to challenge raids in overseas servers because she wanted to see new sceneries, what a joke.

"Hey, get over here!"

His new Armor of Silver Oath was really dependable. It was sturdy with all parts connected tightly. There were no loose pieces hanging around. The Gaze of Lionheart shield was excellent too. It provided better cushion against the shock to his wrist. He could keep on fighting with such equipment in hand. If he shifted his shield in the way of the bright spots in his vision, he could even push back the attack from Ibra-Habura's tail. He could feel the increase in defensive power.

"Do you even lift? Bring it on festival!"

Naotsugu roared with brute force.

"Whoa. Mr Naotsugu, you are fired up!"

Tetora suddenly approached and chatted casually.

Naotsugu leaned even more to protect Tetora from the flames shouting "Leave this to me!" Tetora pulled herself up onto Naotsugu's shoulder and stood facing the arena. She spoke with a clear voice.

"Everyone! How's your fighting spirit?"

The battle was still intense, so no one gave a definite answer to Tetora. But everyone could see her. This was obvious as they would see Naotsugu who was tanking the fierce attack of '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura when they attacked Ibra-Habura. Tetora was speaking to everyone on the battlefield while standing on Naotsugu's shoulders.

A wave of clashing sounds filled the hall. That was the best they could do to respond to the question of this petite idol. Swords and axes rose and fell, frost and lightning rained down on the monster.

Tetora was satisfied with the sound, made a taunting expression and raised the wand in her right hand into the sky.

"Alright, let's fight together! Work hard everyone! Go, go!"

Tetora's courageous and loud voice could make you forget that you were in the underground. The sound reverberated through the air and reached out to her comrades.

Aurora lights with the colors of the rainbow appeared above them. The curtain of light shimmered, shooting stars flew out and pleasing music could be heard. This was the Cleric's special spell Aurora Heal. It was meant to be used for raids, with a wide enough range to cover a hundred Adventurers with its healing light.

"What a great view festival!"

"Of course, I am an angel after all!"

The Cleric was all smiles as she spun rapidly and shot out healing spells like arrows. The speed and skill were even better than the healers of Silver Sword due to Shiroe's support, an excellent raider.

Naotsugu used this opportunity to attack.

Everything was going well so far. As Shiroe expected, the hit points of '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura was less than that of '7th of the garden' Ruseato. It also lacked alternate forms and means to recover health. It only had wide area attacks and the 'characteristic' of sapping the hit points of everyone in the zone.

But the team already knew this, and has equipped anti-heat equipment from their bags and cast the appropriate anti-elemental spells. Even though '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura had a lot of hit points, they already managed to grind half of it away. They should be able to win if they kept up this pace.

(But we can't let our guard down.)

Naotsugu watched the movements of the flaming snake while paying attention to the surrounding situation.

"Incoming!"

"I got it covered!"

Naotsugu wasn't telling that to Tetora alone. Everyone else understood his intentions too.

He was playing the role of a shield. Naotsugu's confidence was mandatory for the main tank of a raid.

'We can win this time.' 'We should be able to pull this off.' If you approached a problem with such a mentality, it didn't guarantee victory. If it was so easy to win, there will be no need for any of Shiroe's stratagems. But if your mind was full of thoughts like 'We are going to lose', 'Let's give up', you would really lose. That's how a raid went.

If you wanted to inspire your teammates, gimmicks such as shouting were acceptable.

The hand on his shoulder took away the heat from the fire, the soft touch spread through his body. This was Tetora's Minor Heal. In order to release the full potential of the Cleric, she made her way to the center of the flame vortex, supporting Naotsugu with her sunny words.

Tetora understood too. Their nonsensical dialogue could turn into everybody's strength. Naotsugu understood very well and was in a good mood. He didn't squeeze a smile out to calm the others, but was really smiling from his heart.

"Have you fallen for me Mr Naotsugu?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Isn't this the place where all sorts of flags are raised?"

"Your inopportune words mess up the mood!"

Naotsugu blocked the spear like attack of the tail as he playfully deflected Tetora's question. He already knew the answer and felt anxious about it. Naotsugu wanted to respond to Tetora's gentle feelings and snuck a glance at her.

"I have something to report to Mr Naotsugu."

"I'm busy right now!"

"If I don't say it now, I will miss the chance to tell you."

Tetora fidgeted her body, her clothes rubbing on her skin loudly while the battle raged on. Naotsugu knocked away the flying debris of sulfuric rocks with his arms and legs and said, "What is it?"

"Actually, I have joined Log Horizon."

"Eh?"

Naotsugu was no longer glancing sideways, he had turned around to face her.

He could see the confidence oozing from Tetora's face and flushed cheeks.

"Lying festival."

"It's true."

"Why?"

"I want to play with Naotsugu some more." She giggled as she cast Heal continuously, the self-proclaimed idol was in a great mood. But she hit Naotsugu's flank with her wand like a cat toying around every time she cast a spell, which irritated him.

"Anyway, who gave you permission?"

"Mr Shiroe did."

"What have you done Shiroe?"

But they had to stop fooling around. Ibra-Habura stood upright like a theme park attraction, opening its mouth and taking a deep breath. It sucked in air and fire noisily. This was the preparatory movement of the wide area assault Merciless Purgatory Feast it used earlier.

"Incoming!"

"Melees pull back! Federico stay and keep debuffing, damage reduction!"

Naotsugu and William shouted at the same time.

The formation changed once again. The melee fighters withdrew like an ebbing tide.

Pulling back from the firestorm would minimize the damage taken. Minimizing damage not only made the job of the healers easier, it also aided in conserving MP.

But the formation was in disarray.

The Summoner Azalea in the 4th party fell down even though there is nothing to trip him, and was shouting something. Naotsugu couldn't hear it. William issued a speedy instruction in response "Dinkuron, behind you!"

While their formation was still a mess, a new battle had begun.

There were two ways leading into this arena. One of them was the white granite passage where Naotsugu and the others entered from. Another was the cave at the bottom of the pit.

A blue giant wearing barbaric furs had emerged from that cave. '4th of the garden' Tarutauruga had joined the fray.

Part 4

It would be a lie to say they didn't panic.

This was expected after the painful experience they went through. But they snapped out of that moment of stiffness with a shout from William.

The Guardian Dinkuron, the pride of Silver Sword rushed out like a bullet, taking on the frost giant with Castle of Stone. The titan swung his club which was several meters wide at the elf warrior who took the hit as if it were nothing. He stood his ground, marking the entrance of the as his territory. He had no wasted movement, the skill of a raider who had gone through hundreds of raids.

Shiroe adjusted his glasses that slipped because of his intense movement and wiped the sweat on his brow. The second change of event was within his expectation.

'7th of the garden Ruseato' was unable to break through the iron gates.

But the 2 raid bosses on the east and west side of Ruseato, Ibra-Habura and Tarutauruga, could enter that arena as well as move into each other's base.

Even if they nullified Ruseato, the flaming snake Ibra-Habura and the frost giant Tarutauruga allying together was a given. Normally, this would be an instant failure. There were no full raids that could withstand the fury of 2 raid bosses at the same time. Their combined efforts were overwhelming.

But was that really so?

After Shiroe respawned, he drew up a plan with this point in mind.

Shiroe and Silver Sword were wiped out in the battle at the arena because their formation was broken by the surprise attack of the other bosses. Analyzing from the victims' stand point, Ibra-Habura's wide area flaming attack coincided with the frost giant Tarutauruga's freezing wide area attack. Just one of these attacks was enough to kill off the defensively weak rear guard, so it was no surprise they were wiped out when both attacked at the same time.

But could their tank take the special attack from just one of them?

Shiroe still remembered the battle with Ruseato, and he felt that another raid boss in the same zone wouldn't overwhelm Ruseato's attack prowess by much. It might be more devastating, but not twice as powerful. Shiroe concluded that it was possible to fend off the attack for either Ibra-Habura or Tarutauruga.

Shiroe deduced that they could hold off both raid bosses if their range of damage didn't overlap. The battle plan was based on this theory.

In this underground lair with just enough space for the raid bosses to move, Naotsugu was holding off Ibra-Habura in the southwest corner. Tarutauruga's attack from the northeast corner was defended by the Guardian from Silver Sword, Dinkuron.

The two shield warriors adjusted their position to keep the wide area attacks at bay.

It was a challenge to adjust their position. The healers had to rush between both fronts to support the tanks. But if they were too far apart, the healing would lag behind. Although it was safer to have a bigger distance so the wide area damage wouldn't overlap, they would be out of the range of the healers.

If they maintained the distance to support either side, there were no spaces which were 'not in range of either boss wide area attack'. For the magic and ranged attackers, they had to be wary of wide area attacks from either side, adjusting their position constantly.

When William heard Shiroe's plan, he smiled and answered,

"We can win this, Mr Shiroe."

Determined to prove his words, William attacked with blinding speed, his arrows drawing a continuous line between his bow and the target. And his commands were issued as fast as his arrows.

Shiroe was also giving everything he got in this fight.

Now was not the time to hold back.

They were fending off the terrifying attacks of these 2 raid bosses. But only because of Dinkuron's Castle of Stone. He did not use it earlier to save it for this moment. To take control of the fight, the two tanks would require the support of healing spells, meaning that the 6 healers in the group would be draining their MP at an alarming rate. The members had been holding back since they knew this might happen, but if they were too stingy with their support, the vanguards would die. With the battle hanging on a thread, the death of the tank meant the collapse of the frontline and the inevitable fate of being wiped out.

The hope of clearing this zone would extinguish along with their deaths.

"Federico, debuff attack power and attack range."

"Understood!"

"Tetora, increase healing rate."

"I can't increase anymore!"

"I will help you... Force Step!"

Shiroe cast a special support spell on her. It reduced the cool down time for all spells Tetora had. The reduction was less than 20%, but the effect was significant. Aurora Heal had a cool down of 600 seconds. With Force Step, she could cast it again after 480 seconds. The MP usage would be even more intense, but Shiroe countered this with Mana Siphon. This was a MP management skill which allowed Enchanters to share their MP with others.

A normal combat party could simply recover MP by resting. That's why people often underestimated the value of an Enchanter specializing in MP management.

But Shiroe liked this uncommon specialty and had been building his character around this.

He felt light headed with the loss of MP, but he continued to attack, calculate and supply MP. He could strengthen the recovery powers of healers like Tetora and Vuorinen. He could help offensive characters like Federico improve their attacking powers too. As he took in the situation of the battlefield, Shiroe's mind focused on the minute details.

"Right here!"

Vuorinen stuck his hand into a puddle that smelled of sulfur and chanted a long spell. It was a special summon available to Druids. A light floated up from his fur gauntlet, rising into the sky. The green light suddenly materialized into a tree. Only Druids with mastery over nature and fairies could form a contract to summon 'Secret of Life' after clearing a high level raid.

"4th party, rally to me!"

The mages rushed under the shade of the tree before William's even finished.

The well-known summon 'Secret of Life' was a skill which conjured a magical tree. By staying under the shade of that tree, you would be bathed in green light and recover HP gradually. The recovery rate was less than the healing spells of Druids, but the long healing period provided a big boost to the raid group as a whole.

Shiroe was calculating.

Just like that time he showed Minori, Shiroe was processing the information of the battle and looking into the future. Behind his glasses, his eyes gazed further ahead in time as he calculated.

Twenty four people was 4 times the number of Minori's 6 men party. By increasing the number 4 times, the capabilities and combinations of their actions increased by many folds. He analyzed, chose, scrapped and combined all these possibilities, 'reading' them.

Reading every attack and heal of his group mates.

The waves of overlapping debuffs reduced the threat of the enemy. The invisible amount of hate accumulated and the feasible actions they could take.

The constantly changing hit points of his comrades were like equalizer panels in Shiroe's eyes.

He could perceive the ripples in the ever decreasing battle timeline, and analyzed each small segment.

"Naotsugu, speed up!"

"Okay!"

"Mr Bolognese, pull back!"

"By your command."

Each action formed single 'words'

When they were connected, they formed a purposeful 'essay'.

Shiroe could see Naotsugu's face in his mind. He could also see Tetora's smile and William's smug face. The faces of Federico, Vuorinen, Demiqas and all other members of Silver Sword appeared too.

Shiroe nodded.

Shiroe finally understood what William meant.

The battle became a 'story' in Shiroe's hand.

It was a marching song that inspired wounded hearts to soldier on.

Shiroe was also touched by William's secrets. That was a feeling that encompassed Shiroe during his days in the Tea Party, a nostalgic and peaceful feeling.

Shiroe held his White Staff of the Wings of Ruins and chanted his spells, executing the plan he devised through his 'Full Control Encounter'. Karma Drive spliced through the air like a giant bird towards Ibra-Habura, leaving a myriad of flashing symbols in its wake.

(15%... 16%... 18%...)

Shiroe bit his lips and concentrated.

Vuorinen's summon, 'Secret of Life' was a good move. The spell recovered more than 30% of hit points for 10 people.

The wide area attack Merciless Purgatory Feast of the flaming snake still had a cool down time of 180 seconds. Vuorinen could counter with Life Burst and Mercy Rain. Next one would be at 360 seconds. Naotsugu could use Castle of Stone again after his cooldown was finished. 540 seconds later would be Tetora's Aurora Heal.

As he concentrated, the world became a blur as he 'read' the ending.

'3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura could fall before the 720 seconds mark. Shiroe's Karma Drive allowed comrades who dealt critical hit to the flaming serpent to recover MP. If they maintained the current pace, they could deliver the final blow to Ibra-Habura before the 700th second mark.

They could then turn their full attention to the frost giant Tarutauruga.

Taking the remaining MP into consideration, there was no guarantee they would win the next battle, but there was still a chance of victory.

Even though they were walking on thin ice, it was still possible.

To put the plan into action was the reason for Shiroe's existence.

To accomplish this, he had to calculate until the very end. Shiroe entrusted his overheating heart into the freezer.

"Please maintain damage output at the current level."

"You heard him, Black Heart Glasses has spoken! Give it your all, defeat the enemy! Don't show any mercy!!"

The moment William issued this order, an ominous black object fell into the center of the pit.

Drip.

Drip.

The black mass rose from the ground, turning into humanoid silhouettes wielding weapons.

Shadow warriors... Minions spawned from the body of '7th of the garden' Ruseato. Their combat prowess was a far cry from Ruseato, but they could match up with several Adventurers easily.

Shiroe suppressed his urge to scream and raised his head to look up. He could see a darkness spreading out from the passageway onto the ceiling. It fell from the ceiling like droplets of oil and morphed into shadow warriors.

Ruseato couldn't get past the iron gates.

But the dark minions he spawned were able to slip through the gaps just like Shiroe's group did, following them into this battlefield.

Part 5

This development was not totally beyond Shiroe's expectations.

The shadow warriors were minions spawned from '7th of the garden' Ruseato. He predicted that they would pester the raid group once the battle began. He only envisioned the need to clean up the handful of shadow warriors that spawned during their initial attack, not the immense darkness spreading on the ceiling, the number of shadows was too many.

... The number of shadow warriors that spawned was equivalent to the number of people damaging black Ruseato.

Shiroe was the one who found out about this.

For this battle, they had taken care of all the shadow warriors who followed them before starting their attack on '3rd of the garden' Ibra-Habura. If that were the case, Ruseato should have zero minions.

Since Shiroe's group had moved on, there shouldn't be anyone dealing damage to Ruseato. There shouldn't be any shadow warriors spawning from Ruseato. The reason so many shadow warriors were created...

Shiroe realized the only explanation.

Ruseato pierced his body with his own halberd.

A shadow warrior spawned because of the damage.

The single shadow warrior and Ruseato did damage to the black armor, spawning two more minions. Rinse and repeat. By sacrificing itself, Ruseato fulfilled its potential of raising the army that was flowing in from the passageway.

"Vanguard!"

Shiroe reacted before he finished his thoughts, screaming his instructions.

Just a bit more. No need for 700 seconds, they could take down Ibra-Habura in 600 seconds. They would have the manpower to spare then. (I have to buy time,) Shiroe thought. (How much time did we take moving from the arena to this place? '7th of the garden' Ruseato spawns a batch of shadow warriors in about 200 seconds. At this rate, how many minions have spawned? 31. At most 63...) He came up with the answer immediately. The latter number would be hopeless, but the former number left a small chance of survival. Shiroe had to do this, even though he felt sorry, he still shouted,

"Attack and kite them away..."

This was like a suicide mission. Getting the herd of shadow warriors to chase you while escaping their wrath. The Silver Sword member Junzo was about to respond, but a stubborn raider rushed out before he did.

"Kyaaahhhh! Out of my way! Phantom Step! Wyvern Kick! Ahhhhhh!!! Taunting Shout!"

Demiqas double jumped in the air as if he were leaping off invisible platforms. He flew in the air like a rocket, spinning as he shouted. That was the provocation skill available to the warrior classes. For an instant, Shiroe saw that all the shadow warriors were focusing on Demiqas.

All members of the raid group including Shiroe saw the long haired Monk when he stopped for an instant. Demiqas seemed to be looking at Shiroe furiously. Shiroe lost his balance when he lost sight of Demiqas because of his fast

movements.

Shiroe didn't know what was happening as he floated in the air, feeling overwhelming speed as he moved backwards.

"...!"

Naotsugu was definitely yelling. But Shiroe couldn't hear him as the scenery in front grew distant.

Shiroe seemed to be moving at an amazing speed within this large hall. Like being in a giant dryer machine, he rapidly experienced sudden acceleration and deceleration.

A shadow warrior appeared before him, ready to swing its battle scythe at the surprised Shiroe. But Shiroe's vision spun as if he had a hangover. The view before him disappeared because of the huge, heinous and dark silhouette of a greave.

"Irritating! Phantom Step!"

Demiqas leapt into the air, leaving the enemies swarming him behind.

Demiqas grabbed Shiroe by the back of his neck as he flew all over the place.

"What are you-?"

"Silence, fucking glasses! Wyvern Kick!"

The blood splattering on his face was warm and smelled like rust, but it calmed Shiroe down.

Was this Demiqas' vengeance against Shiroe by messing up the raid? Or did Demiqas have some plan in mind? Shiroe was not sure. Demiqas was grabbing Shiroe by the back of his neck, similar to a hunter holding its prey.

(But this situation. Isn't too bad...?)

If he looked at it from another angle, Shiroe was like a cannon attached to Demiqas.

With this in mind, there was only one thing to do. Shiroe cast his weak Enchanter attack spells in all directions.

Demiqas should be using Drag Move on one of the minions, but he grabbed Shiroe for some reason and was dragging him all over the place. Maybe he was simply using his level 90 plus wrist strength to carry Shiroe like some sort of cargo. It was possible with the abnormal physical ability of Adventurers. Both scenarios were possible.

But the important thing was that they were pulling the shadow warriors away from the raid group.

"Go to the northeast passageway."

"Shut it, stop nagging instructions."

"Mind Bolt!"

"You damn ink bottle!"

Demiqas' attitude remained hostile, but he changed his bearings.

He kicked the faceless shadows and broke through, rushing towards the passageway while being targeted by countless foes. Shiroe organized the information through his shaking vision. He could see about 20 minions. Including those out of his view, there should be about 30. If Demiqas stopped and was supported with healing, he could last for 15 seconds. If he made do without support, he would only survive half that time. Shiroe found it meaningless to calculate how long he would last, but he knew the answer the moment he started playing Elder Tales. He would be dead in 3 seconds.

"Hey Shiroe!"

As a shadow attacked with a low stance, its head expanded and exploded like a watermelon.

That should be William who dealt the final blow.

"It's meaningless to support here, focus on Ibra-Habura."

"Listen, Black Heart..."

"William! Defeat the enemy!"

His voice reached the proud guild master, but Shiroe was not sure how William would think of it. William looked at Shiroe again with concern and shouted, "All parties focus your attack on Ibra-Habura! Sorcerers! Don't hold anything back, throw everything you have at it!"

The scenery melted before his eyes as Shiroe was moved at top speed, dodging the club of the frost giant Tarutauruga.

The friction Shiroe felt on the back of his neck made him itch. He noticed the encroaching white film near his feet.

"Tarutauruga's White Night. It will reduce movement speed, use fire..."

"Not my problem! Lynx Tumbling!"

Demiqa ignored Shiroe's warning, moving ahead while mocking the freezing spell. Lynx Tumbling gave Demiqa the agility of a feline, he ran on top of the club dashing for the frost giant's wrist. He sprinted for the shoulder next, aiming for new heights. Tarutauruga, who breathed out white mist because of his freezing aura, was kicked by Demiqa in the face as he accelerated.

Demiqa moved with a speed similar to a roller coaster with its safety features removed. It would probably send all its riders to the hospital on its first day of operation.

Loop, tornado, slalom. The invisible threads known as hate bound dozens of shadows as Demiqa led them on a dramatic high speed chase.

Shiroe heard shouting behind him. He couldn't make out what they were saying. Shiroe thought that they were words of encouragement. They should be supportive words from his fellow raiders in Silver Sword as he leapt into the jaws of death.

The noise of the raid battle subsided as they entered the dark passageway. They would need to fight on for another 580 seconds. After that, they would need to rescue Dinkuron and engage the frost giant.

That's why the 2 of them traveling hastily in the dark corridors could not relax. Shiroe kept on casting his spells with negligible attack power.

Astral Bind and Nightmare Sphere would hinder the movement of the shadows for a few seconds. He couldn't target all of them, but he needed to keep pressuring their pursuers. If he let up, Demiqa who was carrying Shiroe would lose a lot of hit points. Not just hit points, Demiqa's MP was dropping rapidly, the price he paid for breaking away forcefully. They were lucky to have made it to this passageway. The two of them were still alive as they moved through the dark corridor.

"Don't use Wyvern Kick for the time being."

Demiqa did not respond.

They could see the shadow warriors about 30m away from them. Shiroe had given up casting magic outside the effective range, focusing on supporting Demiqa with magic instead. In this situation, mobility was more important than attack power. Demiqa dragged Shiroe in the darkness as Shiroe concentrated on his Enchanting spells.

Shiroe didn't understand why Demiqa brought him along.

The kiting strategy was working great so far, but Demiqa probably didn't plan all of this.

Shiroe didn't understand the irrational thinking of this brute and didn't agree with it.

Even after raiding together for so long, their hate and suspicion for each other remained strong.

Demiqa used violence on the People of the Land in the city of Susukino.

It didn't mean only Demiqa was at fault. In the confusion of the Catastrophe, he probably thought that this world was still a game. Demiqa was probably driven by fear when he created all the trouble. The guild Brigandia was notorious when Elder Tales was still a game, a gathering of ruffians. From an outsider's view, the power struggle within the guild might be the cause of their extreme actions.

Shiroe felt there were reasons why they acted that way and understood their thought process. But he was still unable to accept it.

Demiqas abused the People of the Land and violated their rights. He even took part in human trafficking.

And he stalked Serara, causing her much distress.

Shiroe didn't have such a fetish. He could not understand and was unable to forgive.

What a disagreeable man. That's how Shiroe felt about Demiqa.

A lot of time had passed as he thought about this.

Shiroe saw the dark passageway in his view. He wasn't sure how many shadow warriors there were, but he felt that it was unwise to be too far away. Demiqa taunted and attacked them relentlessly just now. It was unlikely for the minions to forget their hate, but it would be prudent to play it safe. The raid would fail if the shadow warriors returned to the hall. Even now, they did not know if they had pulled all the shadow warriors away.

"Stop, we are too far away. Wait for a while."

But Demiqa didn't seem to hear him and continued running.

Shiroe got angry and yelled several times for Demiqa to stop before Demiqa complied. Shiroe was displeased with Demiqa's action and started to protest.

"What are you thinking? Even if you keep on running..."

Shiroe was thrown into the corridor ahead before he could finish, stopping only when his back hit a wall. As Shiroe nursed his wrist Demiqa glared at Shiroe and spoke.

"Hey, Enchanter. Say my name."

Driven by anger, Shiroe thought 'How about calling him Dental Care?' He took a deep breath, lifted his head to look at Demiqa, and chose silence.

This was the first time Shiroe looked Demiqa right in his eyes, and he was at a loss for words.

Demiqa approached Shiroe and leaned forward with a serious and determined expression. Demiqa's eyes were full of resolve, there was something he wouldn't back down from.

Shiroe wanted to accuse him of bringing up such a stupid topic at such a critical juncture, but dropped this idea when he saw Demiqa's face.

Just like William's wish that could not be compromised, everyone else had something similar.

It was the same for Shiroe too. That was why he did not join any guild for so long.

Even Demiqa had such feelings.

Time passed by slowly as Shiroe thought. He realized the anger in his heart was similar to self-loathing. Shiroe who felt helpless during the Catastrophe and didn't do anything met Demiqa who felt helpless and resorted to violence. Demiqa became an outlet for Shiroe to vent his frustration.

Demiqa did some unforgivable things. Shiroe needed to rescue Serara. But it was hard to say whether Shiroe had the right to punish Demiqa. Shiroe was just Shiroe, Shiroe was not the law.

(Even if I had the right to pass judgment... Robbing someone of their name is unforgivable.)

Shiroe realized he had stubbornly refused to address Demiqa by his name.

He thought that he was different from this brute, not recognizing him as a fellow human being.

That's the attitude Shiroe had taken.

"Demiqa."

"Yeah."

"... Demiqa, I despise you."

"Me too, Log Horizon's Shiroe."

Shiroe and Demiqas had come to terms.

They agreed to disagree.

"That's why..." Shiroe words were interrupted abruptly.

The brute placed his hand on Shiroe's chest and sent him flying. Shiroe rolled along the corridor like trash once again. Shiroe curled his body up and rolled, reaching the goal, a cold steel door, like a soccer ball.

"You can wait for your death here Shiroe. I am still busy with these guys."

Demiqa started running again without giving Shiroe a chance to respond. Green flashes could be seen in the dark corridor, shooting into the distance like a meteor.

Several thoughts Shiroe was unable to articulate overlapped each other as Shiroe was left alone in the darkness.

Part 6

Behind the door was a dazzling garden.

Gears that were several dozen times Shiroe's height turned slowly. These gears were connected to the elevator through an intricate system, controlling the circulation system.

The purpose of this vast space was clear with a glance.

On the production line that looked like it was designed by Escher an amazing amount of gold was being moved.

It was a giant mechanism with gears and pistons, controlling the flow of gold coins.

A white pavement placed between the gaps of the machinery led into the depths of the hall. The path was filled with flowers and greenery. As Shiroe moved ahead, he would sometimes cross a small arch bridge, other times he would pass by a pond full of gold.

This garden was the vortex of gold Shiroe expected to find.

The sound of numerous bells ringing made Shiroe turn his head. A series of chains tilted an iron chest the size of a bus forward. The crisp sound of millions of coins formed a metallic melody as coins flow out from the iron chest.

He had no other words besides amazing to describe this sight.

The path meandered around the operations of the machinery. Getting just one bag of gold from the conveyor belt would double Shiroe's wealth. He thought about how much gold was in this garden, but realized that it was impossible to tell.

There was more gold here than he could imagine.

Shiroe didn't think that the contract he brought along was weak.

But it might pale in comparison. If it were Shiroe from last year, he probably would have run away. But he was different now. Shiroe came to the depths of Palm and entered Abyss Shaft with firm resolve.

"... Welcome. Although I wished that you didn't make it here, I still have to say it."

Beside the gigantic golden lake, Shiroe saw Kinjo with his guard. Shiroe squinted his eyes, looking for any difference in Kinjo, but failed as usual. Kinjo stood behind the crystal angel as he awaited Shiroe's arrival.

The angel was '9th of the garden' Uru, the final boss guarding Abyss Shaft. Just 4 meters in height, it was small in stature compared to the other monsters they had encountered so far, but was definitely more powerful than the other bosses. Even if he had brought the rest of Silver Sword along, the chance of victory was still 50/50. It would be suicidal for Shiroe to fight alone. If he actually brought the raid group along, they would probably fail since they were worn down with the consecutive battles. Shiroe ignored the threat before him and looked straight at the young man.

(The color of his lapel pin is different, that's the only difference. It really is hard to tell them apart.)

He met Kinjo in the cabin on the snowy mountain before, and greeted him during a banquet in Akiba city. He also saw Kinjo at the counter when he performed bank transactions in Susukino.

That's the role Kinjo played. That's how the Kunie clan was.

When Elder Tales was a game, they played the role of a bank employee based on the same avatar of the People of the Land. That was the origin of the Kunie clan, Shiroe deduced. He could see fear, wariness and pride in Kinjo's eyes.

(It must be terrifying for them. Even though he has '9th of the garden' Uru under his control, the Adventurers still managed to infiltrate this place... We saw it as a hopeless fight, it is the same for them too.)

Shiroe tried to imagine their plight.

A group of 20 odd immortals charging into your home base like an avalanche.

This was like a zombie siege. They would rise again even when you wiped them out, wearing down the defense gradually. There was nothing more terrifying. It was normal to feel fear and be on your guard. But Kinjo still stood before him despite the danger, probably because of his pride. The pride as a People of the Land and the will to protect Yamato.

They had followed the words of their ancestors till this day, watching over Yamato.

Their unity and loyalty was beyond the imagination of Shiroe, a modern Japanese man.

"I came here to speak with Mr Kinjo."

"Then we have the obligation to hear what you have to say."

"..."

Shiroe stiffened when he heard Kinjo's words.

He expected this, but Shiroe's suspicion at the cabin had raised unnecessary tension, this was his punishment. Shiroe was trapped by Kinjo's hostility. And that was why this young man in white had the duty to finish their conversation.

"Can you explain this flowing river of gold?"

"... Ah, it is. As promised, we will disclose the secrets to you. All the gold in Yamato originates from here and will ultimately return here. Even we do not understand the ultra-ancient technology that controls the distribution of the gold. The gold will be distributed to monsters or even dungeons like this one from this giant viscous stream. This system is the dark secret of Yamato, a taboo secret guarded by the Kunies for hundreds of years."

... Shiroe realized a fact from Kinjo's speech.



For normal People of the Land and the nobles of League of Freedom Towns Eastal, the Kunie clan's management of this system could be seen as a form of betrayal. They would probably think that the Kunie was funding the goblins and orcs.

Shiroe who knew that Elder Tales was a game wouldn't think of it this way. If you thought of it as a system, it was neither good nor evil. But Shiroe had no confidence that the People of the Land who fought lengthy wars with the demihumans would view it the same way. If this fact was exposed, everyone in the server would boycott the operations of the Kunie clan. It might even lead to riots and genocide.

Kinjo was right to be wary. Shiroe didn't consider their circumstances well enough.

"My group and I have no intention to make this fact public."

Unsure of how convincing he actually sounded, Shiroe promised Kinjo.

"... since you made it here, you have the right to bring gold back as dictated by the law of my ancestors."

Shiroe's thoughts weren't conveyed to Kinjo. Kinjo remained guarded, speaking in a tone he had practiced repeatedly.

"With our long history, a part of the documents left behind by our ancestors is missing. We are not sure ourselves whether you can bring back a thousand or a billion gold coins. All I can do is pass on the words of our ancestors to you."

Kinjo stared at Shiroe with flaming eyes, burning with determination.

They might not be wielding blades, but this battle was as intense as the fiercest fight he had ever gone through.

Shiroe gulped under his gaze, his throat feeling parched. He noticed how weak he was. He was smooth and coordinated when directing policies through the Round Table Council, but right now, he felt as though his knees were going to give way.

He remembered the profile of William's crying face. The concerned expression Akatsuki made when she looked up at him. The worries of Naotsugu as he joked around with him. Chief Nyanta who had been watching over him, Minori, Tohya, Isuzu and Rundelhaus who put their trust in him.

What he was feeling now was not weakness.

Tetora commented that she wanted them to win.

He craved victory for the sake of others. The bitter memories of unfulfilled wishes motivated him to search for the best ending possible. The solo player Shiroe who had no responsibilities as a loner was no more. Shiroe thirsted for the ending more than anybody else. Because he was bad at empathizing with others, he had no other ways to repay their kindness.

"The gold of the Kunie is a cursed treasure. No matter how much of it you gain, it is not wealth. Your greed is a monster you are nurturing. That's how the world ends."

Kinjo's words sounded like an ominous prophecy, but Shiroe chose to interpret it as the Kunie giving their blessing.

In the depths of Shiroe's heart, he was glad that he made it here.

Surrounded by the melody of countless bells, Shiroe and Kinjo shared a moment of silence.

Shiroe took out a contract from his magic bag slowly, and tore it in half. The torn contract transformed into gentle light and flames, the sparks dispersing like butterflies before the wide eyed Kinjo.

Gold appeared out of thin air.

"This is..."

"The contract has been completely accepted. The Round Table Council does not seek wealth."

Shiroe told Kinjo with a faint smile.

What Shiroe actually wanted to say was the continuation of the failed conversation they had in the cabin on the snowy mountain.

"We don't want ownership of the guild building. We think we are strong enough to live on in Akiba peacefully. We are grateful to the system which offered us this opportunity, but it is time to end our tenure. Even if disputes were to arise, there must be a way for us to overcome it, that's our conclusion... This contract art ceremony only works when it is signed and then destroyed."

Shiroe puffed his chest out before the confused Kinjo.

"This was not just my own intention, but also the will of the Round Table Council too."

"We transfer the ownership of the guild building, cathedral, commercial hall and all public areas to the Yamato server itself. The contract will be destroyed to make this transfer permanent."

He went through numerous hardships and long discussions to reach this stage.

There were some who thought it was foolish to give up ownership of these zones.

But after doing a cost benefit analysis, this was the plan they came up with. Purchasing a zone for the rights to administrate it just by paying a onetime cost sowed the seed of mayhem.

Zone owners didn't stand to gain from their investment. But faced with the threat that another party might purchase the zone... which meant an attack, they had no choice but to buy it first. This was why the Round Table Council used all their budget and took loans from the major guilds to purchase the cathedral, commercial hall and the city zone of Akiba.

But upkeep became a problem.

The maintenance fees for the guild building alone was manageable. But the upkeep for all the properties of the Round Table Council had now exceeded 10 million gold monthly. This was a heavy burden on their finances.

The threat of an attack would increase the pressure on defense. A committee centered on Shiroe and Henrietta explored the possibility of reducing this burden. After numerous discussions, they formulated the plan for this expedition.

"This... You mean that all the gold here will be used for the purchase?"

"That's right. All the gold in Yamato originates from here and will ultimately return here. That's what you said right? Since the contract has been accepted, the funds were used as dictated by the contract and came back to this place after the purchase. Just as I planned."

"Mr Shiroe, did you come here just to explain this?"

"In a way, yes."

"What about your request for a loan... What is all that about?"

Shiroe pushed his slipping glasses back with his finger.

"That is the main issue. We want to purchase all the zones in Yamato, the forest, the mountains, the lakes, the sea and everything else. By destroying the contract immediately, we can give the rights of all the zones we brought. I proved it is possible just now, so we will do the same with all these zones, relinquishing our rights and transferring them to Yamato... The land of Yamato should be returned to Yamato itself."

Kinjo clenched his fist so hard that it turned pale, holding back his heightened emotions.

"We won't purchase zones that are in the form of buildings. Maintaining the status quo won't affect your clan, but we hope that all the free zones will have the status of being permanently unowned. Also... The People of the Land can't buy zones."

This thorn had been stuck in Shiroe's heart for the longest time.

"This is an abnormal situation. The Round Table Council does not wish to spark off a war. We do not wish to deny the landownership of others. But I feel that the promise made between people will be sufficient. The zone purchasing

system is unnecessary for us. Please loan the necessary funds to the Round Table Council. In order to stop our path towards destruction, please finance us."

Part 7

The ground was uneven and smelled of sulfur.

He felt that it looks dumb to lie down in this place, but William still laid down anyway. If he turned his head to the side, he could see black arrow heads and rags dyed in weird colors. It was probably someone's equipment, it was a mess around here.

His whole body felt hot and strained, even turning his head took lots of effort. The empty spherical space was eerily silent, the sound of geysers and water dripping seemed incredibly loud.

Smelly, hot, painful and tired, this miserable time was also a joyous moment. William knew the wetness he felt on either side of his nose was not blood, but he didn't bother to wipe it away. His arms were in protest mode, unwilling to work because of excess bow usage. All his comrades were on the floor crying anyway.

They won.

They expended a huge amount of resources, some of the raiders were out of battle commission for now. There was one time when they were caught in a tug of war between fainting and resuscitation spells. William felt the premonition of defeat when the bloodied Demiqas returned with the shadow warriors in tow. But their effort in bringing down Ibra-Habura paid off. The 2nd party bought time by holding off the passageway and they managed to pull off the win in the chaotic fight that followed.

They had run out of gas. If the black armored Ruseato were to show up now, they would be smashed to oblivion like a baby. The raid group collapsed on the floor from fatigue. They were covered in mud, having endured ice and fire, totally exhausted... But they were shining brightly.

William sat up with his abdominal muscles, looked around him and laughed.

It was soft, but was very cheerful.

They won.

William thought that was impressive.

It was an unspeakable joy. It was as if all of his regrets, remorse, anxiety and disappointment were wiped away. "Awesome, we did great," William whooped in delight. William felt embarrassed at his limited vocabulary, but it was just for an instant.

(We pulled off a spectacular feat! Awesome, what a great bunch of friends!!)

Federico continued to lay back as he waved his hand.

Dinkuron stuck his hand into a puddle to cool off. His bangs were messy, the image of a cool guy was lost.

Odiso lay prone, waving his wand like a tour guide. Timid Alraunes popped into existence, hesitant to act. A moment later, they dragged water bottles out of the bag and distributed to everyone.

Only a handful of members could move, they were pushing themselves just to sit up straight. It was not an exaggeration to say Silver Sword was just a step shy of annihilation.

But even if they were on the verge of defeat, a win was still a win.

(Ahh, that was really awesome.)

William was like an idiot who kept repeating the same phrase, repeating the word awesome in his heart over and over again. His mind was hazy, the image of his friends grew blurry and disappeared. But William insisted that wasn't because of the tears flowing out of his eyes.

"We won."

"Yeah."

"We won."

"We finally won."

The soft murmurs repeated time and again in the hall.

When William heard their words, his heart was full of joy. He was terrible at making speeches, but the dialogue between his comrades lacks creativity too. It wasn't any different from him and it made him happy.

"Hey guild master."

"What's up?"

William answered Federico whose voice was breaking. Federico pushed his upper body up like a sick patient. "That, over there." He gestured at the mountain of treasure with his chin. These were the drop items and gold from the flaming serpent Ibra-Habura and frost giant Tarutauruga. A huge pile of gold, valuable jewelry and dozens of rare materials. There were phantasmal level weapons and armor too. They defeated 2 raid boss, so the rewards were doubled too.

Basically, equipment could not be transferred. The raid captain William would keep them safe, and distribute it to the members.

There were all sorts of ways to split their stash. They could use a point system based on raid attendance and bid for it, or give the equipment to those who could equip them. Or the ones who wanted the item would play a game of rock paper scissors. The choice of system to use was a problem all guilds had to test through trial and error.

Phantasmal items were powerful, raids were often conducted in order to obtain them. These items with special abilities and great attributes could only be won through raids, earning fame and respect from the whole server. They might even represent the glory of the guild, like the Black Sword Knights.

There were many guilds that dissolved because of disputes in splitting the loot. Because of this, every guild had to spend lots of effort in managing and distributing the rewards from raids.

Silver Sword had been using a point system since Elder Tales was a game. Members earned point by joining raids and auctioned off the reward to the highest bidder. But for unknown bosses they defeated for the first time, the loots would not be given out through the point system, but allocated on the discretion of the guild master William. There would be minimal dissatisfaction if they used the point system, but the items would simply fall to the person who wanted it more, but not necessarily be given to the most suitable player.

William presented the powerful weapons to the best possible person through nomination, taking the efficiency of future raids into consideration as well.

After recovering enough strength, William stood up and approached the mountain of treasure. Multiple windows opened, detailing the variety of items they won through the raid boss on his status screen. The name of the items conveyed how powerful they were.

That was normal. They were the first to defeat raid bosses above level 90. Reaching the top of the hill he had always yearned for, William was so calm that he even surprised himself.

'Eyes of Ruin-Chaos'

'Anti Fire Freezing Blade'

'Ouroboros Scale'

They were all fascinating. All participants of the raid could access the information. They pushed themselves and sat up, checking the windows floating in midair before William. Their hopeful gazes fell on the young man with silvery hair, who considered a while before saying to his teammates.

""Laurel Talisman'. This..."

A metallic talisman with intrinsic gold markings.

Four petals formed a circle within the frame, a glorious piece of art made with expert craftsmanship.

"I think we should leave this for Black Heart Glasses."

Suddenly, the air became thin. This tingling tension you felt when entering hostile territory.

Federico sniffed the air and spoke softly, "It is getting warmer."

It was clear to all the raid participants that the raid in this zone was over. By rights, they still needed to take out '7th of the garden' Ruseato to clear the zone, but there was no need for that anymore. The zone had lost its hostility towards William's group, it was now a safe zone.

"It seems that guy has done something."

Dinkuron said as he brushed the dirt off his fringe.

The negotiation Shiroe mentioned before was probably a success. He was sure it would work, but William still felt a smile on his face when it really did.

"Well, this is a great item. It increases your durability and capabilities, a top class equipment. So, let's give it to... Black Heart. He is not part of Silver Sword, but he is still a battle brother."

Affirmative responses echoed throughout the pit.

As he listened to his comrades' answer that was full of pride, William began giving out the next item.

Part 8

Four days after bidding farewell to William.

Shiroe's group landed on the highway bridge that was covered in greenery. Shiroe, Naotsugu and Tetora waved good bye to the griffons which left because their limited usage time was up. They strolled casually along the ancient asphalt road.

"Mr Naotsugu is being so cold!"

"I'm not, I told you that I hate riding with a pillion because my armor is heavy!"

"Not this again, you keep using the same excuse. Are you reserving that spot for a special someone?"

"That hurts! What is with your sharp retorts?"

"Fufufu. Because I am an idol!"

Shiroe looked up to the sky as he listened to the two of them bicker.

A nice day out in the winter. It would probably last an hour or two during this season, with the sun shining on Shiroe's path ahead.

Shiroe linked up with William's group after the raid, leaving the Palm tunnels for Susukino. It was a warm and happy journey, unlike their trip to Palm.

Demikas' attitude changed drastically. He was nonchalant as usual, but he didn't clash with the Silver Sword members anymore. He didn't converse with Shiroe's team as usual, but Shiroe was fine with that.

They chatted a lot with the members of Silver Sword during their way back to Susukino. They obtained practical intelligence, exchanging information of life after the Catastrophe.

Their discussion was not limited to just sharing their worries in this world.

Silver Sword had a good idea of Akiba's current situation. For the Adventurers who could communicate via telepathy, they could obtain information no matter how far away they were, as long as they knew someone there. But Silver Sword was not too sure about the latest inventions and news. Shiroe felt there was no need to withhold his knowledge, and shared all he knew. In return, Shiroe learned about brand new ingredients they found in Ezzo Empire.

They spent the most time in discussing the large amount of materials they won in the raid. Shiroe was given some of them, but Silver Sword kept the lion's share. If they wished for it, 8th District Shopping Center and Grandeur would

be willing to visit Ezzo to trade with them. Silver Sword needed to sell their spoils of war to replenish their supplies too.

They gathered around the campfire every night, eating their diminishing supply of food. They discussed about the loot they obtained, the creation of new equipment and what their future held... The topics were no different from the times when Elder Tales was still a game.

All the participants including Shiroe felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

They won the raid after enduring so much hardship.

There was no need for words, it was fine this way.

Naotsugu hummed as he polished his new gear. Tetora sat on a boulder and smiled as she swung her legs. Even Demiqas joined in with the usual scowl on his face, resting his head on his arms lazily. Shiroe continued to follow the discussion of Silver Sword as he watched this scene. This was a souvenir for his short journey.

He talked briefly with William.

William wanted to stay in Susukino. Titans had been roaming around as a field raid. This was no different than the Elder Tales game era, but new monsters would join in the fray infrequently. The 'Eyes of Mystery' explained to Shiroe clumsily how to repel them while healing at the same time, making preparations for the next raid. William added that he was worried about Susukino.

Shiroe nodded to acknowledge William plans. He had no complaints about his decision. William was an outstanding guild master and this seemed to be the right call.

"Add me to your friend list."

William said. Even if you added someone to your friend list, you would not be registered with the other person's list. But you could call them if they were on your list, so there was no need to request for others to add you.

Shiroe understood that William meant to say 'Call me if you need help.'

William's expression was milder than normal, probably feeling embarrassed.

"I already added you."

Shiroe replied.

"Good," William answered and lifted his hand as a gesture.

There were only a handful of elite raiding groups in Elder Tales. No matter how big a guild might be, they could only deploy a few raid groups. There were no more than 500 raiders in Yamato server, a number large enough that there wasn't a need to hang out persistently with the same group. There were plenty of chances for them to fight alongside each other. Shiroe learned this from William.

It was the same even if this was an alternate world. Shiroe thought that these relations existed when he was living back on earth, just that he didn't know. There were many people fighting along with Shiroe, just that he was not aware. This was quite a big discovery for Shiroe.

It was the same now too, Shiroe had many comrades just that they were not in the same guild.

Their main objective for returning to Susukino was to pick up ReGan. He had gotten used to living in a hotel, piling documents all over the place. Books he took from somewhere and notebooks filled with his writings surround him, making him look rather excited.

ReGan wouldn't be leaving Susukino for a while. There appeared to be some progress in the inter-city transport gate research. Shiroe bid good bye to ReGan and left Susukino. ReGan would need to investigate other transport gates, and promised to meet up with them in Akiba.

They rode continuously on the Griffons and finally arrived at Lightport. If the Griffons could last another 30 minutes to 1 hour, they would be able to reach Akiba easily, it was a pity they didn't have enough time. But the distance was not so far that they had to make camp for the night.

They walked for a while to warm themselves up and summoned horses, wanting to reach Akiba by the evening. Naotsugu and Tetora took it easy with this in mind.

"Wah, wait a minute, hey, don't climb up!"

"Can I climb up after waiting for a minute? Please answer."

"Are you acting like a kid and kidding me?"

"A kid won't smell as nice as me, fufufu."

"Where did you learn to talk like that... ah, hmmm? Woah, right."

Naotsugu stopped bickering with Tetora, putting her down as he dashed ahead before the summoned horse reached them, shouting "Sorry, my bad!" Tetora sat on her butt and pouted, then circled around Shiroe with a displeased expression.

"It's not going well. Is my charm lacking?"

"Don't go overboard when teasing him."

"It won't be fun if you don't toe the line."

Tetora puffed her chest out with a shining and confident expression. Shiroe shrugged.

"When are you going to tell him you are a boy?"

"I will keep it a secret until Mr Naotsugu finds out, it's more fun that way."

"Now is an important time for Naotsugu emotionally right?"

Regarding his relationship with Maryele.

Shiroe pondered about it. Although the man himself thought he kept the secret well, Shiroe and Nyanta had been silently supporting him from behind the scenes. But they were doing so with their heart, they had no intentions to meddle physically.

"Roger, leave it to me!" Tetora was all smiles, Shiroe sighed as he wasn't sure if Tetora really understood. Shiroe knew Tetora knew how to read the mood, but that didn't mean she would act appropriately.

Although he accepted it because of the flow of things, Shiroe was ultimately the one who allowed Tetora to join. He would feel bad if it troubled Naotsugu.

Aside from her pranks, Tetora was talented in both character and battle capability. She was the one who wanted to join anyway, and Shiroe's good friend also gave his recommendation.

"I didn't stay in Susukino because of Mr Kazuhiko's order."

"I will take your word for it."

"If it were Mr Shiroe... you can save more people than me."

"Log Horizon is not a charitable organization."

"But this world is not heartless enough for people to ignore each other's plight right? How troublesome."

She's right. Shiroe agreed with Tetora's world view.

Buying the guild building to protect Akiba before unrest troubled the city.

But that was not enough, so they purchased more zones.

But they couldn't pay the upkeep fees, so they undid the contract and forbid it from being owned privately.

Hence, Shiroe thought all of the entire Yamato server needed to break free from the system.

Their concept was logical.

The zone ownership system had the potential to bring tragedy in the future, this was clear to everyone. As the first to use the system, Shiroe felt that he had the responsibility to clean up the mess.

In order to execute his plans, he spent a long time contacting all sorts of people and even traveled to Ezzo Empire and an underground dungeon. This world was not simple at all.

(But this is just business as usual.)

When he thought about it, it had been this way since the Debauchery Tea Party days.

Unexpected events would happen when they executed their plans. Even if they felt their power was not enough that had always been the case. "That was the star you were born under, don't give up!" Shiroe remembered KR's irresponsible words.

"Ah~!"

After going around the dangerous hill of debris, their vision broadened. Tetora pointed in front and rushed ahead. A group of people wearing clothes of differing colors right ahead waved their hands at Shiroe. Tetora kept her speed up, causing a stir in the crowd as Naotsugu tried to explain hurriedly.

Shiroe smiled awkwardly, advancing slowly with a warm feeling.

The chief, Minori, Tohya, Rundelhaus, Isuzu and Crescent Moon Alliance's members came to welcome them. Naotsugu was in a panic as Maryele and Tetora clung to him from either side; Henrietta smiled gently as she bowed quietly; Serara who looked so blissful beside Nyanta; Shouryuu and Hien were here too.

As Shiroe moved ahead and waved at the others, he felt a presence behind him and turned around.

"Did you grow taller?"

"My lord is so mean!"

His comment seemed to make Akatsuki unhappy, but she really looked more matured. Her new ninja garb and scarf seemed gentler compared to their meeting at the beach.

Shiroe couldn't help staring at her cute and petite face. "My lord, don't be so rude." Akatsuki dashed to Shiroe's back.

Shiroe's eyes followed Akatsuki as she hid under his arm. This scene was the same as usual, warming his heart.

Akatsuki also fought her own battles.

Just like his discovery on the white sandy beach, Akatsuki definitely brought something back too.

And she got stronger too.

The world was still turning.

While Shiroe was working hard, his comrades were also doing their best in other places. Just like William, he had many comrades running alongside him even though he couldn't see them. This was a reliable, lifesaving piece of information. After concluding his long journey, Shiroe returned to Akiba, uniting with comrades fighting alongside him once again.

Shiroe searched for the words to convey his understanding, but he couldn't do it smoothly because of the quiet happiness. But there was no hurry, there was still lots of time to do so.

Akatsuki looked up at him, waiting for him to say something.

"Akatsuki, I'm back."

"Welcome back my lord."

The lost sparrow obtained her treasure after much hard work, returning to the tree branch to rest her wings.

Even though the stubborn guild master committed some mistakes along the way, he still fulfilled his mission and returned to his base.

The two of them were like children displaying their spoils of war, smiling as they greeted each other after returning home.

Q & A About Raid

Q3 レイドの編成と基本戦術は
どうなっているんですか？

▶A3: 〈エルダー・テイル〉での戦闘の基本は、レイド以前にパーティー(6人)を単位としたモノである。レイドでは部隊全体をパーティーに分割する。〈フルレイド〉では24人であるため、4つのパーティーで構成されることとなる。

『メイン盾パーティー』

役目

高い挑発能力、体力、堅固な装甲、そして強力な回復力を駆使し、強力無比な〈レイドエネミー〉の攻撃を一身に引き受け続け、他のパーティーの行動を阻害させないこと。レイドの花形であるが、同時に最も過酷なポジションである。

構成

〈守護戦士〉: 高い防御能力を持つため必須。

〈吟遊詩人〉〈付与術師〉: パーティー強化やリソース回復を行う。

〈施療神官〉〈森呪使い〉〈神祇官〉: 3職を同時配置して回復力を最大化。

『サブ盾パーティー』

役目

敵懐心(てきがいしん)リセットなどの特殊能力によるターゲット固定の難易度上昇や、複数のネームドエネミーとの同時戦闘など、単独の盾パーティーでは対応しきれない状況でのレイドに対抗するための、もう一枚のメイン盾。

構成

基本的にメイン盾パーティーと同様に硬さと耐久力、回復力を重視する。しかしメインとサブで同様の編成にしようとした場合、この二者だけで大量の回復リソースを占有することになるため、状況に応じて増減することになる。また遊撃目的を重視し、〈守護戦士〉に代わって移動力の高い〈武闘家〉を起用する場合もある。

『物理火力パーティー』
『魔法火力パーティー』

役目

ふたつの盾パーティーたちがレイドエネミーの攻撃を引き受けている間、敵に攻撃を加え殲滅(せんめつ)すること。膨大なレイドエネミーのHPを削りきるために高い火力を発揮する。

構成

それぞれ〈暗殺者〉や〈妖術師〉などの〈武器攻撃職〉、〈魔法攻撃職〉を中心に火力を重視した編成がメインとなるが、最低限の防御、回復を確保するために必ず〈戦士職〉、〈回復職〉を配置するのが通例。〈戦士職〉でありながらある程度以上の火力、短時間ながら高い防御力を期待できる〈武士〉などが起用されることも多い。



これはあくまでも一例であり、“100% 正解の編成”は存在しない。大事なことは、各クラス、参加者の特徴を把握して、“自分たちにとって最適な編成”を見つけ出すことだよ。

レイド Q&A

[Q & A ABOUT RAID]

Q1 〈エルダー・テイル〉における
大規模戦闘って？

Q2 〈レイド〉ランクを教えてください！



▶A1: 単体パーティーでは到底勝てない強力なエネミーを、複数のパーティー、場合によっては100人に迫る人数で攻略する高難度戦闘コンテンツのこと。レベル育成中のキャラクターではなく育成が(ほぼ)終わったキャラクターがさらにゲームを楽しむためのバトルコンテンツであり、クエストの内容としてレイドが設定されているものも少なくない。

〈エルダー・テイル〉では〈特技〉の最終強化「秘伝」に必要であったり、レイドでしか手に入らないアイテムがあるため、憧れのコンテンツでもある。

▶A2: ランクは、必要とされる討伐部隊の人数で表現される。

〈ハーフレイド〉…………… 討伐部隊/ 12人(最小)
〈フルレイド〉…………… 24人(基本)
〈レギオンレイド〉…………… 96人(最大規模)



レイドを主眼とするギルドはたくさん存在するけれど、〈レギオンレイド〉級の部隊を擁する集団は、それだけで一級ギルドとしてのステータスをもつんだ。

Q6 〈大災害〉後のレイドは
何か変わったの？

▶A6: 視界の悪化やミニマップ喪失による戦闘難易度の急激な上昇をはじめ、いくつかの重要で有用な変化も、レイドを取り巻く環境に起きている。

システム外の増員

『〈フルレイド〉のコンテンツは最大二十四人までしか参加できない』という、これまでのシステム(常識)を別方向から切り崩したのが〈D.D.D〉である。実際の戦闘グループとは別の人員を用意し、高所などから戦場全体を観測、(念話)による戦闘管制を行うというアイデアは創意的な効果をもち、〈大災害〉以降の環境ではクリア不可能といわれていたレイドをいくつも攻略するに至っている。

アイテム開発による
支援の強化

〈ロデリック商会〉で開発された〈焼滅の弾(ファイアマンズハット)〉は本来装備制限のない汎用投擲アイテムである(手弾)に強力な炎属性ダメージを付与し、これをレイド全員で投げつけることで、これまでになかった効果を短期間で与える事が可能になった。回復ポーションなどの分野でも日々新しい品物が生まれている。既存の薬品効果をひとつに凝縮させ、ひとつ服用するだけで複数の強化効果を発揮する〈虹の露薬〉や、あらゆる毒素のダメージをHP回復に転化する〈火食身の血(カズラブラッド)〉などは〈大災害〉以後に生まれた大発明といえる。

〈口伝〉の発見

〈口伝〉と呼ばれる従来の〈特技〉に当てはまらないユニークで強力な技術を使う者が現れ始めた。それは従来の〈特技〉を独自に拡張しようものやこれまでになかった効果をもたらすものなど様々であり、新たな戦術を提供する要素となっている。だが一方で、〈口伝〉のほとんどは個人の研鑽(けんさん)によるらしく、教えられたからといって他者がすぐに使用できるようなものではなく、戦術思考においては除外せざるを得ない状況。



こういったレイドを取り巻く環境の変化はまだ落ち着いたわけじゃない。この世界は現在も日々進化し続けている。今まで疑問とされていたレイドも新しい工夫で突破される可能性は高いんだ。

Q4 レイドギルドの運営をしてみたい！

Q5 レイドに参加したときの報酬が知りたいものだな。



▶A4: レイドを行う団体としてその運営や維持を行う場合、まず中心になるのは発起人であるレイドの主催者。レイドギルドであればギルドマスターが担うことになる。

レイドというバトルコンテンツを中心に考えれば、ギルドマスターがそのままリーダー。そしてメイン盾パーティーを兼任することがポピュラーといえる。〈D.D.D〉や〈黒剣騎士団〉などの名だたるレイドギルドのリーダーが〈守護戦士〉なのは理由があるのだ。

▶A5:

【戦闘の経験値】

レイドに登場するエネミーは総じて通常よりもかなり高い経験値をもつ。とはいえレイドに参加するようないレベルの〈冒険者〉であればレベル上限に達していることも多く、報酬としては副次的である。

【〈特技〉の強化】

強力なレイドエネミーは、それぞれが〈冒険者〉の〈特技〉を〈奥伝〉ランクに強化する〈熟練の巻物〉をドロップする。また各クラスの〈特技〉は特定のクエストをクリアしなければ〈秘伝〉ランクに強化することができず、それらのクエストには必ずといっていいほど大規模戦闘が設定されている。

【報酬の目玉】

レイドエネミー産のアイテム群。〈秘宝級〉〈幻想級〉といったユニークな効果を持つ武器や防具、そして素材アイテムなどなど。特に〈幻想級〉アイテムはレイドでなければ入手できない強力なものの揃いであり、常に多くの〈冒険者〉のモチベーションとなっている。



どのように戦い、勝利するか。その筋道を模索し、挑戦し続けること。そして幾度もの敗北を乗り越え、“みんなで”つかむ勝利の達成感こそがレイドコンテンツの最大の報酬だぜ！

Q7 代表的なレイドクエストが知りたいです!!



▶A7:

〈ヘイロースの九大監獄〉

仕組み

数あるレイドコンテンツの中でも屈指のテクニカルさで知られる。その名の通りの九つの監獄(ダンジョン)からなる複合メガダンジョンを攻略する大型コンテンツである。開始時点では〈空の監獄〉(銅の監獄)〈騎士の監獄〉など、八つの監獄に挑戦可能で、これら全てを攻略することで、九つ目の〈最終監獄〉の封印が解け、挑戦可能になる。

特徴

第一〜第八監獄の攻略順は任意に決定でき、また複数の監獄同士でイベントや仕掛けが複雑に連動しており、攻略する順序によって難易度が大きく変動する。

攻略方法

「あるものを封印するために作られた魔法の監獄」という舞台設定から、監獄内ではエリアごとにさまざまな行動制限(回復魔法使用不可、火属性を持つ全ての効果が無効など)が課される。これらは一定の条件を満たすことで解除することができ、いかに素早くその方法を探り実行するかが攻略の第一段階であった。しかし監獄の制限は、そのエリアにいる全てのキャラクター、つまりプレイヤーだけではなくモンスターにも適用されている。このため、考えなしに行動制限の解除を行った場合、相対するモンスターたちもそれまで使用できなかった強力な

攻撃手段を使い始めるようになってしまふのだ。このため、このダンジョンにおいてはそれぞれの制限の内容に合わせた「制限」と「解除」の取捨選択、およびパーティー構成、装備、特技のセッティングや戦術の構築が不可欠となる。

レイドエネミー

〈七なる監獄のルセアート〉はメガダンジョン(ヘイロースの九大監獄)のレイドエネミーの一体で、〈騎士の監獄〉エリアに登場する。漆黒の騎士鎧に包まれた巨大な体躯から繰り出される大鎌の一撃はそれだけで致命的威力を持つが、彼とのバトルにおいてそれ以上に厄介といえるのがその戦闘エリアである。ダンジョンギミックにより〈回復職〉または〈魔法攻撃職〉のメンバーが行動不能に陥った状態で戦闘を強いられるため、設定されているレイドランク以上の苦戦は必至となる。

このギミックは事前に〈騎士の監獄〉を探索することで解除が可能であり、この場合〈冒険者〉は全力を発揮できるようになるが、それは同時に〈七なる監獄のルセアート〉のフルパワーの封印が解かれることを意味する。この状態では状況にあわせて〈白騎士〉〈黒騎士〉のふたつのモードに変え、多彩で強力な魔法をも使い始めるのだ。「発狂状態」とも言われ、攻略初期においてはレベル上限で挑んだ〈フルレイド〉の部隊が十五秒もたずに増減したともいわれている。

〈神託の天塔〉

天高くそびえる巨大建造物〈神託の天塔〉の58階層で〈冒険者〉を待ち構える強大な龍神〈ウェンカムイ・タビソロ〉は、長大な体躯を持つ東洋龍の姿に様々な毒気(リョウキ)をまとい、最上階を目指す者たちの前に立ちふさがる。身体周囲にわたる毒気は腐蝕性の毒エリアを形成しており、〈ウェンカムイ・タビソロ〉に接近する、もしくははされるだけで毒と腐蝕の状態異常を受け続けることになる。

その身体巨大さから、このエネミーには「部位ダメージ」が設定されている。だが部位破壊を狙うためにはシビアな位置取りが必要となるうえ、戦闘の長期化も避けられない。また破壊されるたびに敵陣心のリセットを伴う強力な全体攻撃を繰り出してくるようになるため、うかつに行えばそのまま全滅に繋がることもある。



〈天地異動〉

〈イースタル〉と〈ウェストランド〉の国境近くにそびえる〈精霊山〉と、その周辺の地域を舞台とした連作クエスト。〈精霊山〉の地下よりエネルギーを盗み出し、強大なアンデッドとして転生した〈不死王〉を討伐するのが目的で、大きくふたつのパートに分けられているのが特徴。

通称「地下パート」と呼ばれる探索クエストは、パーティーもしくは〈ハーフレイド〉程度の難易度設定がされている。

一方の「地上パート」は、〈フルレイド〉で行う大規模戦闘となり、険しい〈精霊山〉山中の山岳フィールドに始まり、〈不死王〉の力によって〈死霊が原(ハダスプレス)〉と化した〈セギハラ〉、そして〈不死の樹トヨタ〉にいたる大規模戦闘を連続的にこなしてゆくことになる。

地上パートの敵戦は非常に困難で、当時、〈D.D.D〉〈黒騎騎士団〉〈ハウリング〉〈放浪者の茶会〉といった勢力が早期突破を目指し、激しいクリアレースを繰り広げたことはヤマトサーバーでも語り草となっている。

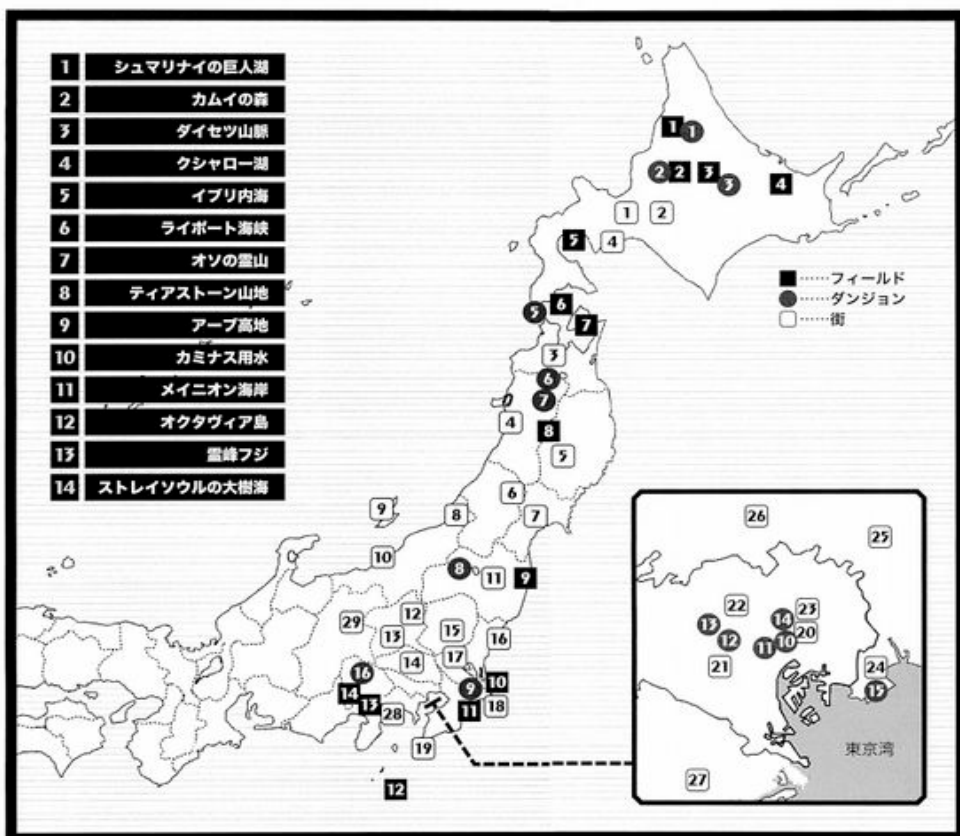
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LOG HORIZON

Elder Tale's MAP



〈エルダーテイル〉MAP 東日本編

「ELDER TALE'S MAP」

「エルダーテイル」に存在する街やダンジョンが明らかに！詳しくは次ページへGO！

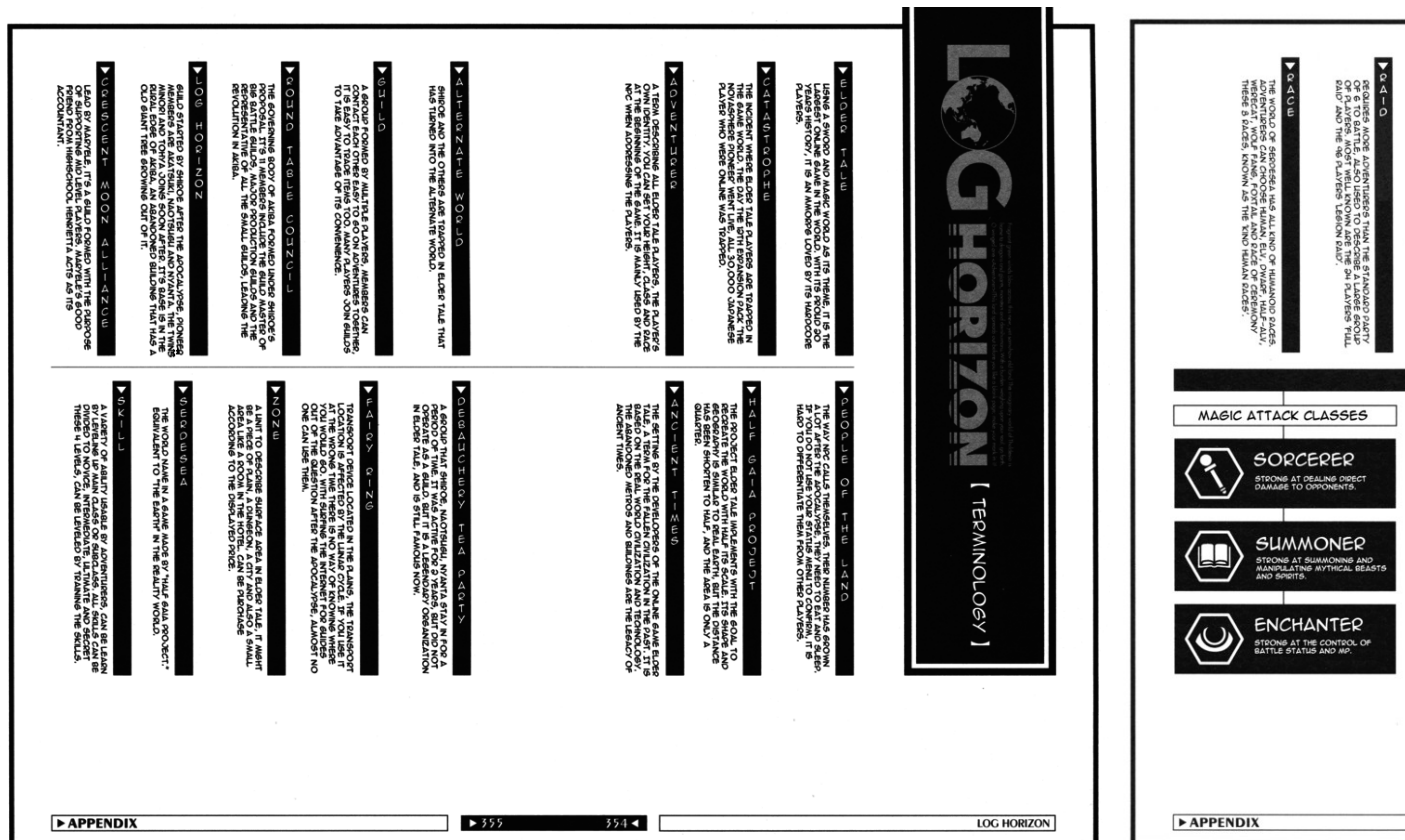


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LOG HORIZON



Log Horizon Terminology

Elder Tales

Using a sword and magic world as its theme, it is the largest online game in the world. With its proud 20 years' history, it is an MMORPG loved by its hardcore players.

Catastrophe

The incident where Elder Tales players are trapped in the game world. The day the 12th expansion pack 'The Novasphere Pioneer' went live, all 30,000 Japanese players who were online was trapped.

Adventurer

A term describing all Elder Tales players, the player's own identity. You can set your height, class, and race at the beginning of the game. It is mainly used by the NPCs when addressing the players.

People of the land

The way NPCs calls themselves. Their number has grown a lot after the Catastrophe, they need to eat and sleep. If you do not use your status menu to confirm, it is hard to differentiate them from players.

Main Class

It decides the player's battle ability in Elder Tales. When a player start the game, they can choose from 12 unique classes, categorized into warrior class, weapon-based class, healer class, and mage class. There are 3 classes from each category, a total of 12.

Sub Class

Have no direct relation to battling, but a convenient skill to have while playing the game. Compared to the 12 classes, there are over 50 subclasses, from convenient jobs to joke subclasses, it has a wide variety mixed in.

Akiba City

One of the player cities in Yamato, its position is relative to real Japan's Akiba.

Crescent Archipelago Yamato

The world of Serdessea is based on the real world. Crescent Archipelago Yamato is equivalent to the region of Japan, divided into Ezzo Empire, Fourland Dukedom, Ninetail Dominion, League of Freedom Towns Eastal and Holy empire Westelande these 5 areas.

Half-Gaia project

The project Elder Tales implements with the goal to recreate the world with half its scale. Its shape and geography is similar to real Earth, but the distance has been shortened to half, and the area is only a quarter.

Ancient times

The setting by the developers of the online game Elder Tales, a term for the fallen civilization in the past. It is based on the real world civilization and technology. The abandoned metros and buildings are the legacy of ancient times.

Alternate world

Shiroe and the others are trapped in an Elder Tales that has turned into the alternate world.

Guild

A group formed by multiple players, members can contact each other easily to go on adventures together, it is easy to trade items too. Many players join guilds to take advantage of its convenience.

Round Table Council

The governing body of Akiba formed under the proposal of Shiroe. Its 11 members include the guild masters of big battle guilds, major production guilds, and the representatives of all the small guilds, leading the revolution in Akiba.

Log Horizon

Guild started by Shiroe after the Catastrophe, pioneer members are Akatsuki, Naotsugu, and Nyanta. The twins Minori and Tohya joined soon after. Its base is in the rural edge of Akiba, an abandoned building that has a old giant tree growing out of it.

Crescent Moon Alliance

Lead by Maryele, it's a guild formed with the purpose of supporting mid-level players. Maryele's good friend from highschool Henrietta acts as its accountant.

Debauchery Tea Party

A group that Shiroe, Naotsugu, Nyanta stayed in for a period of time. It was active for 2 years, but did not operate as a guild. But it is a legendary organization in Elder Tales, and is still famous now.

Fairy Ring

Transport device located in the plains, the transport location is affected by the lunar cycle. If you use it at the wrong time there is no way of knowing where you would go. With surfing the internet for guides out of the question after the Catastrophe, almost no one can use them.

Zone

A term to describe an unit of area. It might cover a plain, a dungeon, a city, or even a hotel or some small areas, can be purchased at the displayed price.

Serdesea^[1]

The world's name in a game made by the Half-Gaia Project. Equivalent to the "Earth" in the reality world.

Skill

A variety of abilities usable by Adventurers, can be learned by leveling up main class or subclass. All skills can be divided by novice, intermediate, ultimate, and secret these 4 levels, can be leveled by training the skills.

Cast time

The time needed to prepare before activating a skill. It differs from skill to skill, powerful skills usually have longer cast time. You can maneuver while casting combat skills, but any magic spells will be interrupted if you move while casting.

Motion Bind

The effect of being unable to move your body temporarily after using a skill. Unable to move or act until skill stiffness wears off.

Recast time

After using a skill, the time needed to use it again. This restriction prevents a player from spamming a specific skill. Some skills have the restriction of using it once per day.

Call of Home

One of the basic skills all Adventurers can learn. Can instantly teleport to the last visited safe zone with a cathedral. Has a cool down of 24 hours.

Raid

Requires more Adventurers than the standard party of 6 to battle, also used to describe a large group of players. Most well-known are the 24 players 'Full Raid' and the 96 players 'Legion Raid'.

Race

The world of Serdesea has all kind of humanoid races. Adventurers can choose human, elv, dwarf, half-alv, werecat, wolf fang, foxtail, and race of ceremony these 8 races, known as the 'kind human races'.

| Main Classes | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| Magic Attack Classes | Healing Classes | Weapon Attack Classes | Warrior Classes |
| Sorcerer Strong at dealing direct damage to opponents. | Cleric The ultimate healer boasting of the greatest healing ability. | Assassin A pure attacker proficient in the use of diverse weapons. | Guardian Wields the highest defensive ability and abilities that gathers enemies by aggro. |
| Summoner Strong at summoning and manipulating mythical beasts and spirits. | Druid A magic-type healing class that allies with the natural and spirits. | Swashbuckler Takes up a guerrilla-like position. Duel-wielding and versatile. | Samurai Uses Japanese-styled equipment, and wields powerful skills. |
| Enchanter Strong at the control of battle status and MP. | Kannagi A preventive-type healing class that blocks off damage. | Bard A light-armored warrior fluent in many "songs" of magical effects. | Monk A balance class that lacks armaments but excels in evasion. |

Translator's Notes and References

[1] <TL: <http://www9.nhk.or.jp/anime/loghorizon/story/images/map.jpg>>